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# THE VALIANT HEART

BY

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## PROLOGUE

"Bring from the craggy haunts of birch and pine,
Thou wild wind, bring
Keen forest odors from that realm of thine
Upon thy wing.

Oh wind, oh mighty, melancholy wind,
Blow through me, blow!
Thou blowest forgotten things into my mind
From long ago!"

(From LYRA CELTICA.)

# PROLOGUE

## THE HOUR BEFORE DAWN

IN the darkest hour of the night, the hour before dawn, deep was the hush in the birth-chamber. The torches burnt low, the storm-wind moaned and wailed; the very flames on the hearth burnt fitfully, quivering and trembling as if in terror of some sinister and icy presence invisible to mortal eyes.

The Queen, white-lipped yet ever valiant, strove to restrain the cry which broke from her despite her resolute proud courage.

Daughter of a warrior, wife of a warrior, she would fain be mother of a noble warrior, who should blend mercy with justice, tenderness with bravery, beauty with strength; one whose life would be as a shining star in a world of darkness, sorrow, and confusion.

Very long and fervently she had prayed for such a son; and now at last her hour had come. But in her deep prophetic love she trembled for the fate

of the soul to which she was to give an earthly body. A voice in her heart seemed to whisper that by her very consecration of her child to the service of the Unknown God, she was dooming him to toil much, suffer much, renounce much; and meet with nought but contumely and base ingratitude.

And the pain which pierced her soul was sharper, more rending, than the pangs that tore her body.

To those who watched around her it seemed she fell into a swoon which had the semblance of death; and they wailed and wrung their hands and cried, "Woe, woe, woe!"

And the storm wind rose outside and howled in anger and derision.

Mortal birth and death, human life and love, woman's ecstasy and anguish, what are these to the mighty Storm Wind?—the wind which blew over the face of the earth and waters even in the dawn of Time, the wind which has seen race after race people the world, and struggle, and fight and fall, only to perish and be forgotten!

Very mockingly shouted the winter wind, while the Queen lay motionless, hearing naught of the sobs and cries and prayers around her. But even

as the eyes and ears of her body were closed, the eyes of her soul were opened; and beside her bed she saw a black-browed being, not human though made in the image of mankind.

Very majestic was he, strong of limb, and taller than the tallest; but dark and somber, with strange glowering eyes which brooded and smoldered, and cast upon the Queen a spell of icy horror.

His robe was black, as if he for ever mourned. By his side there hung no weapon; yet was the mere glance of his eyes so potent, so bitter-chill, so evil, that the Queen's soul trembled, as she said, "Who art thou?"

And the Being answered, "Great am I; a Lord and Ruler over men; for behold in me a spirit who many a thousand years agone defied even God, the King of Kings, and rose in mutiny with the Arch-Rebel, stronger than the tyrant God."

Then the Queen marvelled and said, "Why comest thou to me? Never have I rebelled against the Great Unknown God who rules my heart, the God of Love and Mercy whom no man yet has seen; and whom, alas, none worship in this kingdom, save only I the Queen."

Very scornful was the Evil Being's smile, and his contempt beat on the soul of the Queen like blasts of angry tempest.

But she faced him bravely: "What wouldst thou?" she said; "I know thee not."

And the Terrible One answered, "I would curse thee, I would blight thee, shatter thee, destroy thee."

And the soul of the Queen trembled again, but still she faced her adversary.

"What evil have I done thee?" she asked, wondering.

"Great evil hast thou done me," said the Spirit of Darkness; "for so strong thy prayers that they have risen up even to the throne of the Most High, the God of Gods, whom I and my potent Leader hated and renounced."

Almost did the Queen pity the dark-browed Spirit with the terrible eyes. Branded, defiled, and darkened as he was, never could he forget the God from Whom he was self-exiled.

And as the Queen gazed upon the Fallen One, wondering how a Being so iron strong and so majestically stern had yet been weak enough to be seduced from his allegiance, her pity pierced even

the pride of the Dark Spirit, and he felt remorse and shame and torturing anguish. But only for a moment; for so bitter his pain, that he hated the more poignantly this mortal woman whose compassion made him feel himself so trebly vile.

In his furious anger against God, and against her, God's handmaid, his eyes grew black as midnight, and he answered and said, "Relentlessly shall I for ever hate you; for by your prayers you draw to earth a fiery soul who will defy and mock the power of the potent Prince of Spirits, age-long foe of God the Absolute! Tireless my hatred of thy son. From his birth to his death will I persecute him; little joy shall he have; much servitude, and shame and degradation."

Then there came upon the Queen's soul such an overwhelming anguish that it seemed as if the Unknown God, the God of her secret dreams, had left her naked and defenseless to this enemy who knew not mercy nor could comprehend true love.

Her tortured spirit quivered in her body, and in one brief moment she thought she felt the sorrows of many thousand years of woe and darkness, even from the beginning of the world.

But very steadfast was the Queen, with the courage which burns brighter the darker the night.

From the black deeps of loneliness she resolutely gazed up to the highest Heavens; and though with her mortal eyes she saw no light, yet the light came down to her in shafts of radiance.

And the Spirit from the Dark Abyss shrank back and trembled in the light.

Then were the eyes of the Queen's soul closed awhile to give her rest; then opened once more. And she beheld a glorious Being, radiant as the golden sunshine, gentle as the tenderest woman, stronger than the strongest warrior.

Rose and gold and purple were his wings, and dazzling his sword of light, for he was one of those who fell not; those who at the end of Time shall win the great predestined victory, when sin shall die and death shall be for ever conquered.

"Very valiant art thou, O Queen," he said, "and chosen to be Mother of a Warrior of Love, whom I shall guide and inspire at the bidding of the Most High. See thou tellest no man thou hast this day beheld me; nor tell how bravely thou didst confront my adversary, he who was long ago my friend, my

starry brother, but who has fallen, fallen, fallen, and conspires to destroy the souls that I must lead and strengthen."

Greatly marvelled the Queen, and her heart was filled anew with wonder; for, as the Glorious Being spoke, his shining eyes brimmed over with tears of pity for the angry Fallen One, against whom he must fight until the end of Time, but for whose treason and rebellion he yet grieved.

. . . . . .

Dawn broke across the waters in a golden radiance; and, as the light of sunrise shimmered on the turbulent waves, the voice of the oldest druidess sounded out, tremulous and yet exultant:

"The sacrifice has been accepted; the High Gods are appeased! The Queen shall live. And behold, her son is strong and beautiful, without a spot or blemish."

Then the Queen gave thanks and praise in her heart to the Unknown God—who had sent His messenger to strengthen and uplift her even in her darkest hour.

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# PART ONE

# CHAPTER I

## SUSPENSE

IN the palace by the sea the Queen of Western Alba waited and watched. Very pale her noble face; very weary her spirit, though in her quenchless courage she held her head proudly, and spake in a calm even voice, so that none suspected the dire anxiety that racked her, nor knew how a mortal illness slowly but surely sapped the strength of her body.

Beautiful was she still, with the beauty which years cannot blight, nor pain destroy. But the hand of fear lay heavy on her spirit, for she felt a doom approaching—doom not to be averted by any druid's spell, nor washed away by woman's tears.

Yet she gave no sign of grief to the young maidens who broidered and spun around her, they whose faces were smooth and fair, whose innocent hearts were untroubled by love or foreboding.

The Queen's hands, long and slender, lay lan-

guidly on the golden arms of her chair. On a cushion of purple rested her feet; a mantle of white and gold hung from her shoulders; round her queenly brow her diadem glimmered; but brighter shone her eyes. Yet was this very brightness no light of joy, but the stern sad light of deathless valor, conquering fear and making ready to endure even the worst the Gods might send her.

Fiery red was the sky, for the sun was setting in anger; and the waves of the sea were reddened as with the blood of heroes.

On the Stones of Sacrifice that morning the Druids had offered a victim, bound with thongs and quivering with terror, a pure white doe; and its eyes had been piteous as the eyes of a maiden seeking mercy from the ravisher.

The Queen's heart had sickened to see it; and she knew that if this sacrifice availed not, ere another moon had waxed and waned, then would the dark Arch-Druid cry aloud for human victims; even as on the fateful night when Britric her son had come into mortal life, when the Druids, reading woe and menace in the stars, had striven by sacrifice to win the favor of the Gods. In the very moment while

the Queen was lying helpless and unconscious, the sacrificial knife had been put into the King's own hand.

"Strike," had the terrible Arch-Druid thundered, "else thou shalt have on thy soul the death of thy Queen and the destruction of thine offspring; for the Gods disdain and hate the soul that faints and falters."

And the King,—who never paled in battle nor feared the javelins and chariots of ruthless foemen, —paled in disgust, and an involuntary sharp remorse, as he stabbed to the heart the victim chosen by the great Arch-Druid whose word no man might dare to question.

Eighteen years agone was that night; and for eighteen years had the Gods sent riches, victory, glory, and all that the heart of the King desired.

But the Queen grieved in silence for the innocent blood which flowed on the altar in the very hour she had given birth to the son she dedicated secretly to the Loving God.

Not even to the King had she revealed her sadness; for she knew that in his fear for her and for the child he would have slain many, if thereby

the Druids said her life could be prolonged and the child's safety guarded by the Gods.

Were not the Druids ministers of the Gods? Did they not claim the power of the Gods to bless, to curse, to loose and to bind, not only on earth but in the underworld of darkness?

She alone of all who listened to their stern pronouncements, inly rebelled; and prayed to the Compassionate, the Hidden One, the beautiful Unknown God, to free the land, and rule it through mercy, not sacrifice.

But never even to her son had the Queen revealed the thoughts of her heart. And now she felt the hour of Fate approaching.

As the sun sank in a flaming ball and the sky darkened, the shadow of coming desolation entered her very soul.

And once again there seemed to stand at her side the Evil Spirit with the smoldering eyes, those eyes of hate and jealousy and scorn; a scorn the more relentless because the scorner knew himself degraded, felt himself so vile.

And the Queen prayed, "God of Love, desert me not."

## CHAPTER II

### SORROW

WINDSWEPT was the moor, and bloodstained; and the birds of prey were gathering for their banquet, while a fog swirled up from the sea, mocking the thirst of the dying.

And over the heather, stumbling and faltering, bleeding and faint and weary, four faithful spearmen of the Guard carried the broken body of King Britric, pierced with a score of wounds and mortally smitten.

"Retreat; but fear not! We will return!" the King had said in the instant when he tottered and fell like a giant oak the lightning has blasted.

Fain would he have fought to the last, and have fallen with his slaughtered foes around him. But so deep his wounds that no longer could his limbs support him; and very frightful would it have been to him to be made captive. Never would he give up his sword to mortal man! So he had bidden

his trusty spearmen carry him away, while the Captain-in-Chief led the troops, retreating. And even as they retreated, their arrows hissed defiance as they shouted a scornful farewell to their pursuers.

Defeated were Britric's men, but not yet conquered. And the King, his eyes dim and his throat parched, struggled to speak and keep up the hopes of his soldiers.

"Well have ye fought," he said, "nor are ye shamed this day, for their numbers were twice our own. But not yet is the conflict ended. Back will we march some nine moons hence, in the season they think themselves securest."

Gasping he spoke, and his voice sounded in his own ears like a far-away roaring of waves and tempests. Full well he knew that for him there would be no more fighting. Yet he trusted Britric his son would avenge him.

In his hand he gripped his sword-hilt; but the blade was broken. And despite his valiant words and resolute spirit his heart sank with foreboding. Many prayers and sacrifices had the Druids made to buy the favor of the Gods! So when the King

returned defeated, darkly would the Druids scowl, and cast all the blame upon the warriors!

The King groaned; and the spearmen deemed the pain of his wounds tormented him. But never yet had King Britric moaned over torment of body; the groaning was wrung from the depths of his soul.

Who would protect his Queen and aid his son, his only son, when he had perished?

Death he had looked in the face a hundred times; nor feared he to die. But for his Queen and his people he feared, if he must leave them unprotected. A warrior had Britric been from his boyhood; nor had he thought to purchase victory without valor, nor renown without dire hardship. The Gods give power and fame at a price, and none may escape the payment.

Mighty of thew and sinew, tall and vigorous and gallant, true to his friends and just to his foes, such was King Britric. Not subtle of brain, nor crafty; nor ever had he been luxurious. Not the roughest spearman fared harder than the King in warfare, for he asked of the humblest nothing he would not do himself. Well was he loved and served, by his Guards, his spearmen, and his archers; and his two

score years and ten had given him experience how he might curb the headstrong and yet never chill their ardor. But his mind was sorely troubled for Britric his son, who, though hardy and strong and aspiring, was yet but a boy. How would he win obedience from the graybeards, and hold with a firm hand the arrogant tempestuous Captain of the Guard?

Much these questionings tormented the King, while the spearmen, with lurching steps, carried him over the moor; and the fog swirled thicker and thicker around them.

The spearmen halted; and the archers behind them halted.

Exhausted, bewildered, they knew not how far they had come. The mist was in their eyes and their throats. Easier might they have found their way at midnight! Verily it was as if a drowsy spell breathed silently through the fog. A stupor came upon the men, and they murmured hoarsely,

"The King is dying; we are lost without our leader."

But the King opened his eyes; "Never shall ye be without a leader. Be faithful to Britric my son, even as ye have been to me."

As he spoke the wind awakened, and came blowing from over the mountains; and it fought with the fog from the sea, as if the spirits of the sea and the mountains clashed in a mortal conflict.

The weary spearmen laid the King on the ground; for a while they could carry him no further.

Britric gripped his broken sword and held it aloft, with a hand still powerful though ice-cold from the fog and wind and the chill of approaching death.

"Never shall valor be in vain," he said.

And even as he spoke the heavy clouds rolled away, and shafts of sunlight smote through the fog and dispelled it.

"See," said the King, "an omen! A promise of victory."

Then the spearmen lifted him up again, on the litter they had made with their javelins and shields and cloaks; and they saw they had come farther than they knew. Within two leagues of home were

they. But their hearts were heavy and despairing; for Britric's eyes had closed, and they dreaded lest he swoon to death ere sunset.

. . . . . .

Red was the sunset, after a day when all the elements had seemed let loose in warring wildness.

As a ball of fire the sun sank below the sea, while the Queen was watching and waiting.

And the afterglow of rose and gold paled into gray and purple.

Then came dusk and gathering gloom.

Through the dusk stumbled the battle-worn spearmen; and with them the archers; and in the rear, a league behind them, the Chief Captain of the Guard, with the remnants of the routed army.

And as the Queen waited and listened, she heard the tramp of feet, not brisk and rhythmic, but dragging and irregular.

From her tower she descended; and into the great hall where her Lord the King was wont to banquet.

Heavy and heavier was the gloom; not yet were torches lit in readiness for the King's home-coming.

Up the center of the hall marched the spearmen, carrying their burden; and they laid it at the Queen's feet, as she stood motionless and silent on the dais.

Not a word did they speak, but gently they drew back the cloaks that covered the King's body.

On her knees fell the Queen; and with trembling hands she clasped the King's hands as she spoke to him tenderest words of endearment.

But there came no answer; save only such a hush and stillness that the spearmen bent their heads in awe, and waited and listened, but knew not for what they listened.

Tears dimmed their stern eyes. Nevermore would Britric lead them to battle. Nevermore would the notes of his horn ring out through the woodland.

Very majestic his face in death; very martial and regal his body, pierced with many wounds.

The spearmen stood in silence, waiting till the Queen should dismiss them. But the hush deepened; yet the Queen did not speak even one word.

And the dusk waned to darkness.

Suddenly there flashed a torch in the doorway;

and its light flickered on the fair and eager face of Britric the Young.

Nought knew he of the blow that had befallen him, until the voices of the spearmen came through the hush:

"The King is dead! Hail to thee, Britric our King!"

## CHAPTER III

### THE UNQUENCHABLE HOPE

IT was the hour before midnight.

In the dark lay the stricken Queen, wide-eyed, and tearless in her sorrow.

Bitter cold was the night; and the storm-wind blew across the bay in furious gusts. In its roar there seemed a menace of relentless hatred. As though demons were riding exultant on the tempest, shrieked the blast that beat on the King's fortress.

Young Britric too was sleepless; for he foresaw, dimly yet surely, that great pain and little joy awaited him. His boyhood ended for ever in the moment the spearmen had saluted him as King; and now, face to face with the loneliness of king-ship, already the burden pressed heavily upon his spirit.

Yet why should he deem himself alone, when his Mother, Queen in name and Queen in nature, would

still be the inspiration of his life,—she to whose rare wisdom, patience, gracious dignity and tender love he owed so much?

Thus he mused and pondered; and, musing, fell asleep.

But the Queen lay wakeful yet; and her sorrow was less grievous for her husband—who had lived and loved and fought and reigned, and whose troubles were over—than for her son, whose troubles were yet to come; troubles which he must face unaided.

Twelve moons had passed since a slow and wasting illness had fastened its grip upon the Queen; and though for her husband's sake she had fought it with all the resolution of a will which love made stronger than steel or iron, yet its pitiless secret inroads sapped her strong vitality, though her spirit never flinched nor wavered.

When first she had been stricken with these pains, the Druids had held consultation round her; and with prayer and chanting and much sacred ceremony the healing rites had been performed.

But the Queen had only sickened the more.

Whereon the Arch-Druid's voice grew harsh and

his brow overcast, and he declared in the hearing of many that the Queen was tortured by a demon.

With his wand he touched her brow, her breast, her hands; and in a resonant voice he uttered words of command,

"Demon accursèd; to the Black Abyss thou shalt return. In the name of the High Gods I bid thee depart and be enchained for ever."

Yet was the Queen not healed. Rather she grew each day more pale, and the threads of gray showed in her hair, and around her bright eyes came fine-drawn marks of pain.

Then was the Arch-Druid yet more angered and affronted; and to the King he said,

"Were not thy Queen a sinner, she had been made whole this day. Never does my healing fail with the righteous, for have I not the powers of the Gods working through my fingers and my sacred wand?"

Then the King had answered rebukingly,

"As a spirit from the skies is my Queen; never did I hear from her a word that I would fain not hear. Never have her love and wisdom failed me."

But the Druid frowned and said, "In the name of

the Most High Gods I pronounced her healed. If healed she be not, then in her own soul must be the secret evil."

Very furious was the King to hear his wife thus scorned by the all-potent one; but while the Druid hurled forth these angry words of calumny, the Queen looked at her accuser with steadfast eyes, the light of which no pain could quench. And the eyes of the Druid wavered and fell.

Without more speech he turned and withdrew; and his face was hard as granite.

With rage and grief did the King tremble; he who never had trembled from fear.

"Cursed be these priests," he said. "How can the Gods work through hearts black with jealousy and hatred? But if love can heal, my love shall make thee whole."

Then the Queen's eyes brimmed over with tears, and her pain of body grieved her the less; so much greater her joy to see that not even the Arch-Druid could cast a shadow over the King's unchanging love.

In her husband's arms she rested, and strove to

think how best she might defend herself from the malice of the Druids.

"My heart's Love," she said, "brave must I be to endure and conceal this pain. To-morrow shall I be robed in my mantle of state, and with the circlet of gems on my brow I will ride forth at thy side and show myself to the people. And though the pain tear and rend me, yet must my courage never falter; for if the Druids see me suffer, they will curse me as possessed by evil spirits. Then will they drag me from thine arms, and shut me away, and dethrone thee if thou darest to defy them."

With a tempest of wrath was the King shaken, and under his breath he said, "Too truly dost thou speak. Slaves are we to these Druids. If I defied this pitiless Arch-Tyrant, he would tell me I am but King and a rude warrior, while *he* is chosen of the Gods! So, my Queen, wise would it be to dissemble. And perchance a merciful God will bring thee in secret the healing our pretended friend and secret adversary hates us too bitterly to give."

Twelve moons agone had this befallen; and the Queen's life from that day had been a martyrdom. When, in the presence of the people, she gave thanks to the Gods for the Arch-Druid's miracle of healing, so sharp were her pains that the dew of anguish sprinkled her brow, and her limbs trembled. But she held her head erect; and so queenly and noble her bearing, so steadfast her eyes, so gracious her smile, that none save only her King, her loyal lover, could know what she endured.

Very strong her frame, and very resolute her courage; and although thenceforth she suffered many tortures in her body, yet still the flame of her mind and spirit burned clear and pure with the light of immutable valor.

Even from Britric her son she concealed all her pangs; and to his Mother he looked as to a rock of strength, as to a star at midnight, as to the sunlight at noon. And never did she fail or disappoint him.

Morning dawned gray and gloomy after a night of furious storm. The shrieking voice of the wind

was lowered to a sobbing moan; and the waves ceased their loud roaring, and lapped on the shore, sullenly, wearily.

The Queen-Mother lay in her bed and listened to the waves and the wind. Certain it was that never with mortal eyes might she greet another morning. For her power to endure had been strained at last to breaking.

Right glad would she be to follow her husband; but very deep her sorrow to leave Britric her son.

All through the night she pondered how best she might warn the young King of the perils that beset him.

Open and free and frank, even as his Father before him, evil he saw not till it had been unmasked. So ardent was he for the good and the noble, that in his presence the jealous feigned generosity, the envious strove to seem willing and eager to admire and to praise their betters, and the liars made a cunning semblance of pure zeal as champions for the truth.

Very dark and crushing the Queen's fears for Britric; she knew that he was born for greatness,

and that greatness must needs be lonely in a world of littleness, and love be persecuted in a world of hatred.

Stretching out her wasted hand, she touched a bell of silver, and at its sound her maidens all gathered about her.

"Summon hither the King," she said.

And even as she spoke, she lifted up her eyes and beheld young Britric in the doorway.

With a sign she bade her maidens leave her. Then the King came in, and knelt at her side; and, of a sudden, her paleness smote him with terror and foreboding.

He bowed his head; and very tenderly she stroked and caressed his brown-gold hair.

"Listen," she said, "for the time is short before I must go from thee."

Then Britric quivered as if an arrow pierced him: "Not yet, not yet!" he supplicated. "Cruel are the Gods if they rend thee away."

The Queen's eyes shone with a beautiful radiance;

"Not the cruel Gods, but the Unknown God of Love and glorious compassion shalt thou trust;

the God of whom I have dreamed; the God who would have mercy and not sacrifice; for his divine majesty can stoop to pity all the griefs of mortals, to pity, heal and comfort."

Britric's eyes opened wide in astonishment; how should his Mother know a God unknown of the all-wise Druids?

"Ere thou wast born," she said, "to the Unknown God I prayed that thou, my son, shouldst be fired and inspired of Him, and filled with his love and mercy. Very cruel this world; and as strangers and exiles on earth did thy Father and I live, and strive to live justly. But now is *our* service ended; and now thine must begin."

"But what may I do for the Hidden God?" asked Britric.

"Remember and say to thyself, *'God, the Unknown, the Eternal, is nobler than the noblest man, and gentler than the tenderest woman. The brave, the loving and the true are children of His Spirit.'* But the world knows Him not. Sacrifices, and the prayers of men are offered rather to God's adversaries, the angry demons, thirsting for blood and tears, and hungering for victims. In the very

hour of thy birth, human blood flowed on the altar."

No words had Britric to answer; and his Mother's voice sank lower while her eyes shone the more brightly, as with a light from the God of her secret dreams.

"Be pitiful to helpless women, my child," she said. "Very miserable their fate. Have mercy even towards the humblest. Deeply hast thou loved me; and thou wilt be ever loyal and constant. Never will my love be quenched; as a circle of light shall it shine around thee, though unseen of mortal eyes."

Dim were the eyes of Britric with tears which were burning like fire. In the grip of Fate was he held; and his blood was icy, for he felt the Messenger of Death approaching. And he knew not that the Messenger, who to *him* seemed cruel, came to the Queen in gladness, even to say and declare,

"Lo, the Immortal God of Love, Whom thou hast served, recalls thee to Himself; and the hour of thy healing dawns."

Suddenly it seemed as if a new strength entered

into the Queen-Mother. In her bed she raised herself; and upright she sat; and so happy and serene her face that Britric believed the shadow of death had passed away, and he feared for her no longer.

Then the Queen stretched out her arms, and cried,

"My King, I come!"

Her voice quivered with an ecstasy that pierced the soul of Britric.

Then did her eyelids droop as in sleep; and she fell back, and lay unseeing and unknowing of his sorrow.

And in her sleep her valiant soul passed away from her pain-racked body; and at last the Queen was free.

Nor had she wakened to say one word more of farewell to her grieving son. And much did he ponder and wonder whether the King she had saluted was the mortal King her husband, or the great Unknown God.

Longwhile he gazed on her body after the soul had fled from it; and lo, her brow was young and smooth, for all the lines of sadness were wiped away.

Then into his heart there descended such dark loneliness that his joy seemed quenched for ever.

But he gripped his sword-hilt with a resolute hand, for he knew there were enemies within and without, and that his Father's foemen would soon be gathering anew to ravage and invade his kingdom. So must Britric master his grief and hide it, and hold his head erect. For was he not the King?

# PART TWO

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CONQUEROR

IT was a stormy day in autumn, some fourteen moons after the death of the Queen-Mother. Britric was yet unwed, though the Druids had spoken in council and put forth the names of two royal maidens, either of whom would bring gold to his coffers. But the young King had answered, "First would I repel my Father's foes, and deliver my kingdom from peril, ere I don the robes of a bridegroom and sun myself in the smiles of a fair woman."

Then had the Druids frowned. The King was but a boy in years, and they thought to rule him even as the skilled rider rules the spirited horse. But Britric baffled them. All through the kingdom he traveled, till there was no hind nor shepherd who did not know his face. And every day from early morning till high noon, open and easy of ac-

cess was the King, so that the humblest could tell him their troubles and say who had oppressed them and wherefore they were ill-contented. And the fame of his mercy and justice, his strength and his compassion, spread from north to south and east to west; and all men honored him, and women revered him.

In him the people put their trust. And though they brought sacrifices of rams and bulls and heifers to the altars of the druids, yet to the King's wisdom they looked, and in the King's face they sought comfort.

Then Britric was glad, for he deemed that the spirit of his mother guided him, and that she was more happy since death than she had been in her earthly life.

The night his mother died, Britric had looked deep into the eyes of sorrow. But in a valiant spirit sorrow breeds strength, and the pang of loneliness goads the heroic heart to gallant deeds in honor of the loved one. So Britric rallied the routed troops, and called to his banner the vigorous hinds and the sturdy shepherds, and with a fiery patience he taught them the use of javelin and bow

and axe, till they were able and fit to serve by the side of the practiced warriors.

Then had he sent out spies to discover the schemings of the enemy; and on the eve of the foemen's planned invasion he, Britric, took the adversary by surprise, and fought and won a mighty battle.

Then did the enemy, who erstwhile scorned him as a boy, respect him as a man.

And Britric returned in triumph, to be received with joy and acclamation.

Then the Druids said unto the people, "Lo, by *our* potent prayers and sacrifices have *we* won the victory. But for *our* wisdom and *our* favor with the Gods, the sword in the King's hand had availed him little."

But the women said among themselves, "Did not the Wise Ones offer many sacrifices on the day the old King was defeated and our sons were slaughtered? Not the prayers of the long-robed, but the strong arm of the warrior keeps us safe here in our homesteads. But for young Britric, we had been raided by the foe, and our roof-trees burned, and our daughters carried away into slavery! Long life to Britric our King!"

But they spake in whispers, for they feared the anger of the Druids.

Very joyous was Britric the morning after he came home a conqueror. He rode forth into the open, where he had proclaimed the spoils of war should be divided in full view of all the multitude.

Into the sunshine his chair of state was carried; and beneath a spreading oak it was placed. And around him in a half circle stood his Captains of the Guard and all those who were leaders each of three hundred.

Much booty had his soldiers won in the fight; weapons of bronze and iron, steel-headed spears, targets of hide, mantles of fur, and brooches and collars of gold.

At the foot of the King's chair they heaped the spoils, keeping back nothing. And at the King's word the wealth was divided, so that to every soldier was a trophy, and the most to the most valiant.

To the Druids nought was allotted; and for himself Britric kept nothing, save only an arrow-head in memory of the fight. The collars of gold and

mantles of fur he gave to his Chief Captains, and the other spoils to each according to their fitness.

When the weapons and the gold, the apparel and the grain, had been apportioned, there smote on the King's ear a sound of bitter sobbing, as some two-score captive women were led into his presence, bound with thongs and tied one to another even as slaves.

"Will the King distribute these?" said the Chief Captain. "Her of the rose-red lips and the slumbrous eyes I would take for myself."

But the King's young face grew stern, and he answered in a strong voice which was heard by all around him,

"Not against women do I war. Unbind them and set them free."

Then the brow of the Chief Captain grew black as thunder.

Very tall was he, taller than the King; and renowned for his mighty arm ere ever Britric was born. But as he hesitated and scowled, the King stepped down from his chair of state, and with his

own gold-hilted dagger he cut the thongs. And to the women he courteously said, "No ransom do I ask. To your homes shall ye return. Long and rough the way; therefore a trusty escort shall protect you from the wild beasts and from chance marauders. The Gods be with you."

The women gazed on him dumbfounded. Never had they heard of a King who sent back prisoners of war unransomed. And his army marvelled.

But there was one among the captives who had no desire to return to her own home.

At the King's feet she flung herself, and in a voice exquisitely sweet and plaintive she pleaded,

"Send me not back, O King; for my father was slain in the wars long since, and very lonely and desolate am I! Of mine own flesh and blood there is none living to cherish me."

And the King raised her up and said, "What wouldst thou?"

Very pale was she, and the tears on her face were even as dewdrops on a trembling wind-flower. Dark were her eyes, and heavy and thick her lashes; but rosy her lips; and her voice was as music.

And the King's heart was touched with pity for

her as she gazed up adoringly into his face and said, "O, mercy, Great One, mercy on the desolate!"

Then did the Chief Captain lay a heavy hand upon her shoulder.

"I will take her," he said. "Not noble her race, nor fit is she to attend on the King. An outcast she is, the daughter of an outcast; for though her father was renowned among our foemen, her mother was but base-born, a poor Phœnician slave. So claiming this woman for my prize I claim of thee a trifling bauble. But I yield up a collar of gems in payment, O Britric, for I fain would have this maiden."

Then the girl flung herself again at Britric's feet and said, "Rather slay me with thine own hand, great King, than give me to this black-browed one, whose very glance chills me with terror."

The Chief Captain smiled grimly, and to Britric he whispered, "Very young and simple art thou, O King, to heed a cunning woman's feigned distress. She makes display of grief and trembling; but 'tis nought, 'tis nought! She will love me the better in that she fears me."

But the King waved aside the collar of gems;

and in his clear ringing voice he answered, "This captive maiden asks my mercy and protection. Had she loved thee, I never had gainsaid thy taking her. But to give her to thee when she fears thee would be cruel and ignoble."

"Cruel!" echoed the Chief Captain, and his scornful laugh was as the lash of a whip.

Shuddering the maiden crouched at the feet of the King and gazed up at him as at the God in whose hands lay life or death.

Then from the crowd around him did the King summon by name a gray-haired woman who had been a servant in the household of his mother.

"Take thou this maiden," he said, "and cherish her with thy daughters, even as thou wouldst have thy youngest daughter cherished. Well will I requite thee."

The woman paled; and in fear she bowed her head. Nor was it the King she feared, but the Chief Captain, whose eyes were on the maiden as the eyes of a hawk waiting to pounce on a trembling dove.

And the maiden shrank from the fierce eyes, and shivered and drew her mantle closer round her.

Then she gazed upon the King, yearningly, beseechingly.

But Britric was speaking with his men and noticed her no longer.

And at this her tears flowed freshly; and she sobbed as she was led away.

# CHAPTER V

## LONELINESS

WHEN Britric distributed the spoil, and the soldiers cried "Hail to the King!," it came upon him to wonder if in all the hosts of those who gladly obeyed him while he led them to victory, were there any who would be true to him in grief or sickness or disaster?

Then he inwardly chided himself for what appeared a gloomy and unjust suspicion. But the shadow of loneliness had closed around him while his men were yet acclaiming him with joyous shoutings. (Who shall declare whence come the silent voices whispering even in the hour of delight and adulation, "This too shall pass away!").

As Britric stood so that the throng might better see him, even as he responded to their salutations, it was as though his spirit were carried far into the future; and there in the distance waited a mass of people, whose faces, sullen, lowering,

fearful and angry, hostile and menacing, were eloquent of all those base and muddy passions Britric had prayed the Unknown God to stamp out of his people's hearts.

Swiftly the vision paled; ere the acclamations died away it had vanished. Yet the cries of "Hail to the King!" sounded to Britric's ears like the howling of a storm.

Of his haunting premonition his face gave never a sign. His mother had trained him in the royal virtues, self-command, self-conquest. "He who is born to be a leader of men not only may not show his fear or dread, if fear oppress him. He must drive out of his heart even the shadow of a fear, lest it fly and reach the hearts of others." So had she spoken. Therefore when the gloom came upon Britric,—and suddenly like a thief or an assassin it was wont to come,—he wrestled with it, sternly overcame it; and then felt afterwards the stronger for the conflict.

Many days after his home-coming the gloom pursued him. The west wind murmuring in the branches, the wavelets lapping on the sea-shore, the voices of the song-birds in the thickets, the hoot

of the owl at twilight, all seemed to be crying "Beware, beware, beware."

In his outward bearing, he was ever the same and consistent, strong and strenuous and courteous, and seemingly calm and contented; but an inward bewilderment assailed him, a dim vague sense that the evils in the world were so deep-rooted that for one man alone to strive to pull them up and tread them underfoot was nigh to madness, or was a task rather for a God than a mere mortal. Yet how should the Gods themselves cleanse and redeem this earth unless mankind stood ready to strive and toil for them, even as gallant soldiers stand waiting to obey a trusted leader? The Gods are the Captains, and men the warriors answering to the orders of the Great Ones; and the Unknown God, the secret God veiled in silence and mystery, He is King of Kings, and yet to be the Conqueror.

Since the dawn of Time the warfare of evil against good has waged unceasingly without a truce or respite.

But what is "good"? And what is "evil"?

Surely "good" is justice and valor, noble generosity and tenderness; the courage which never flags

and the loyal love which is as sunlight. And "evil"? What can it be but treachery and lying, envious hate and coward weakness, and the tyranny of the cruel over the helpless?

So mused Britric. And in his heart he knew that so long as his people were bent beneath the yoke of the Druids, so long as horrible fear was ruler over the land, so long must misery and smoldering anger, secret hate and purblind ignorance, shut out the light of the dawn.

"Has not man something divine in his soul," he thought, "even reason and memory, and the discerning will to choose 'twixt good and evil? But the Druids give no power of choosing; nor may any save their own initiates ponder or think or aspire! As slaves are my people, slaves to priestly mutterings and cloudy mysteries. But I would make them a race of freemen, who should serve the Gods for love, and not from this base terror lest the Druids blight them."

But not in all the length and breadth of his realm was there even one man to whom the King could safely have whispered the questionings and the ambitions of his heart. Therefore he was lonely.

And ever it was his duty to give out hope and comfort, wisdom and justice, courage and mercy. And all men took from him; and no man gave to him, save only the obedience due to a King. To Britric the *man* they proffered nought; and in the hours when the gloom crept into his very soul, he hungered and craved for a brother, a sister, a friend to whom he might speak freely as to another self.

Clear was his brain, and he knew that of all around him, even among the Captains of his Guard, there were none who could be brethren to his spirit, none to whom he might reveal himself without that veil which wise Kings lift not.

In burdens and responsibilities the King must carry the weight of the whole multitude; he must be more than man. Never must he show his weariness, nor fail in patience; nor stumble beneath the weight of care.

It was a day of sunshine and shower in the blossoming spring-time. The King had heard the claims of those who thought themselves oppressed; he had done justice to the helpless, and curbed the

power of the strong, controlling the unruly and admonishing the lazy.

Then had he eaten at the feast with his Chief Captains; and attended a grim council of the Druids. And he had mustered his bowmen and spearmen; each day he inspected them in person; and now the hour had come when he might wander alone into the forest.

In council the Arch-Druid had again rebuked him in that he was yet unwed. But while the Druids in chorus echoed their High Priest and urged the King to marriage, certain was Britric that a princess of their choosing would be put into his arms but as a spy of these most potent masters, tyrants who in the name of the High Gods had arrogated to themselves the power to dictate to every creature in the realm, beginning with the King.

Resolutely Britric had responded, "Reverend and grave ones, very humbly I defer to your learning in the lore of the sun and moon and the mystic stars; and in the secrets of the Gods ye tell me ye are each one initiate! But for the choosing of a Queen, content am I to trust mine own heart's counsel."

Then had the Arch-Druid looked into the King's eyes, and with a steady stare and falsely smiling lips he had said, "Very foolish wilt thou be, O Britric, son of Britric, if in a woman thou seekest peace for thy heart and soul. Leave dreams to poets; leave the care of souls to the wise and holy. Choose rather a woman for the strength and beauty of her body, that she may bring thee stalwart heirs. A wise King should breed many children, lest by war or sickness his line might perish in a single day if it rest on one life only!"

Then Britric—who knew it had been whispered as a reproach against his mother that she bore none but him,—paled in his anger, for beneath the Druid's words he felt (though not yet could he wholly fathom) a sinister and hidden meaning.

As he walked alone in the woodland, the King mused uneasily, trying to find a clew to the labyrinth of treason closing invisibly around him.

Gaily the song-birds chirruped, and the breeze was fresh and fragrant; but Britric sighed, for the beauty of the day made him feel himself even more lonely. The woman he could endure to wed

should be one who might love him for love's sake, not only because he was the King and could give her much gold and gear. For love and tenderness he would choose her. Yet must she be of a queenly spirit, starry and noble as his mother whom never yet he had ceased to mourn.

But where could he find a woman he could trust as his own soul?

As he walked and mused, there mingled with the fluttering of the wings of birds, and with the sighing of the west wind in the tree-tops, a gentle sobbing sound, not passionate nor angry, but very soft and piteous.

Britric stood still and listened, and waited; though for what he waited he could not have told. The sobbing seemed but as an echo in a dream.

Very heavy the oppression on his spirit; for he knew he must wed, and yet he shrank with loathing from the thought of taking to his arms a woman chosen of the Druids.

Wearily he bowed his head in a prayer to the Gods to grant him patience and wisdom; and while he prayed he thought there was none to see him. Little did he divine that there was one who watched

and waited, devouring him with passionate eyes.

Longwhile was his head lowered in prayer; and when he raised it, from between the ancient tree-trunks there glided a young maiden.

Dewy her eyes with tears; very pale her face, with a pallor as of a snowy blossom. But rose-red her lips; and so enchanting her smile that the King looked on her in silence, having no words to greet her, so strangely sweet was she.

As the spirit of the Spring she appeared, with witching smile and tear-brimming eyes; yea, even as Life itself, in which joy and sorrow are twins who seldom for long can be parted.

As the King gazed on her, so did she gaze back on him, speechless, ecstatic.

Then with a tremulous cry she flung herself on the ground at his feet; and her voice thrilled him like magical music as she murmured, "Now can I thank thee, Great One, for thy mercy to the humblest of thy handmaidens."

Not till this moment did he see her as the woman he had saved from the lust of his Chief Captain.

Very gently he raised her.

"Art thou happy, my child?" he said; for she

seemed to him but as an infant, so tender, so young, so helpless.

"Happy? Yea, my Lord and Master; now I once more have seen thee, now I have poured out my gratitude at thy feet, truly am I happy."

And again her voice sounded as music.

To a fallen tree he led her, and bade her be seated and tell him whether she dwelt at peace with those to whom he consigned her.

The maiden clasped her hands; white hands and beautiful they were, though her mother had been but a slave.

"Very greatly do I bless the hour I was carried away a captive," she breathed, scarcely above a whisper; "for had I not been taken by thy spearmen, never had I won thy generous compassion, O most glorious King; so had my life been gray and empty! But now, come life, come death, Giséla has been blessèd, in that she has known *thy* justice."

She gazed up at him worshipingly, as he stood leaning against a venerable oak tree.

And as her eyes were upturned to his, in a rapture she concealed not, neither sought to veil, it

seemed to the King that at last he had discovered a beautiful transparent soul in which was only frankness, openness, and never a shadow of deceit or of contriving.

Very young was the King; and never yet had he seen the woman he desired; but his heart now was stirred with pity for this maiden.

Her sire a warrior from beyond the mountains, and her mother a Phœnician slave, there ran in her veins the conflicting instincts of command and of servitude; and in her soul the passions of two races would wage inner warfare. So mused Britric.

"Art thou wise to walk alone in the forest," he said, "one so young and so fair? Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold."

Of the Chief Captain he was thinking as he spoke.

But the maiden smiled.

"Nay," she said, "in thy domain, O King, no man would dare molest me. Have they not seen thy justice? Did they not hear thee grant me thy royal protection? And who in the realm would dare to disobey thee?"

Then, before the King spoke even one word in

answer, she bent down and embraced his feet; and, like a spirit of the forest, glided away into the shadows; as a vision or a dream or a delusion. Even thus, she vanished.

## CHAPTER VI

### FATALITY

TWO score and ten years of age was the Chief Captain; Captain of the Guard had he been to Britric's Father; and he had fought in many a stubborn conflict ere ever Britric was born. Very angrily he chafed in his heart that young Britric claimed the power to debar him from the woman whose languorous grace had captured his fancy.

The woman was only a woman, and one of many; and folly would it be to quarrel with Britric for the sake of a slave's daughter. But the Captain of the Guard was little wont to be crossed in his desires; and this woman, whom he would have flung aside after a seven-night had he possessed her, he coveted hotly now, because denied his will.

So after a while the thought came to him that he would take her by stealth, and carry her away and conceal her.

He set his spies to watch her movements, and

they told him when the day was fine she walked alone in the forest the hour before sunset.

Into the forest he went, and there he waited.

And when Giséla reached her accustomed place, where three ancient ash trees intertwined long drooping branches and made her a leafy canopy, ere she knew her danger she was gripped in the iron arms of the Chief Captain.

Then terror mastered her. For she had shrunk from him at first sight, as a song-bird recoils from the serpent, as the doe shrinks from the hound.

And now in a pitiless grip he held her.

So overcome was she with loathing that the beauty of her face was overshadowed, and her eyes lost all their sweet enchantment. Like a trapped wild thing of the woods she seemed.

Her captor held her at arms'-length, and looked at her with a gaze which disdained her even in the moment that he wooed her.

It seemed to him she was neither beautiful now nor worth the taking.

The color had ebbed from her lips, her alluring grace had vanished; sheer terror blighted her.

The Chief Captain laughed; "Bah! Am I an ogre that thou tremblest lest I eat thee? Short my time for dalliance, and swift my wooing; but soon will I teach thee to love me; and thou shalt have gold and a robe of silk to repay thee."

But Giséla spoke no word; nor did she struggle nor cry out; and what thought might lurk behind her cloudy dull eyes and pallid face her tormentor had not skill to read. But he felt baffled; for her fears made her repellent, almost ugly. Yet his instinct of mastery goaded him to try again to win her.

"Maiden," he said, "youth is fleeting, and beauty the flower of a day. Already thy beauty paleth. When 'tis withered, no man shall desire thee, nor offer thee gold nor gladness. So take and give delight, while yet there is time. Of thine own will would I have thee; for little joy can I gain of a woman dumb as a beast of the field, and cold as an image of clay! But not yet has a woman ever denied me. Many have vied for my favor. Of the King's Guard am I Captain-in-Chief, and well can I reward thee for thy soft embraces. So tremble not."

Incautiously he raised his voice. Giséla's dumb resistance roused him to anger.

Mossy was the ground; a breeze was rustling the leaves. The ear of the Chief Captain was muffled; very deeply had he drunk that day of mead and metheglin; and a deafness from an old wound in his head was troubling him. So he heard not what Giséla heard, a footstep. But he saw a sudden light flicker in her eyes.

Then her voice rang out, piteous, entreating, heart-piercing: "Have mercy! Mercy! Mercy!"

A grip of steel closed on the right arm of the Captain; and turning his head furiously, his eyes looked into the stern bright eyes of Britric the King.

Very calm was the King, as was always his wont when angered.

"Dost thou not know this maiden has my promise of protection!" he said in his clear level tones.

The Chief Captain showed his teeth in a snarl. Not ready of speech was he; and for a moment there was silence.

To quarrel with Britric over this woman would be sheer foolishness. Little was she worth a brawl;

and he could take her another time more easily than now.

"In many a battle had I fought when thou wert in thy cradle, my King," he said reproachfully. "Thy Father's right hand was I; and well do I love thee. Would I take from thee a woman thou desirest? Nay, most willingly I yield her; nor do I feel abased or humbled; for what woman living would not choose rather a fair young King than an old war-worn Captain!"

His smile broadened to a jarring laugh, and, laughing again, he loosed his hands from Giséla.

Then Britric released his arm; and without another word the tall Chief Captain turned and stalked away and was lost to sight.

Giséla sank on the ground and hid her face. She trembled and quivered in effort to stifle her sobs.

The King felt his heart stir with an intense compassion for the wretched lot of women. In his youthful pity he saw men as hawks, and women as poor fluttering pigeons.

When the maiden looked up at him, imploringly, beseechingly, her look thrilled him with pain; her eyes were piteous as the eyes of a heifer when

the Arch Priest smites it to death on the High Altar with the sacrificial knife.

Then Britric thought, "Are women and dumb animals to be for ever sacrificed? Shall not man's justice be tempered with mercy?"

And Giséla rose to her feet and said, "My King; be pitiful. There is one refuge only where the terrible Chief Captain dare not touch me, even thine own house, O Britric, son of Britric! Let me be lowest of all among thy slaves; or let me die. But give me not to the Chief Captain."

Still the King was silent; and Giséla could not read his thoughts, nor did she understand why his face was sad.

"Noblest of All," she said, "very strange it seems that in thy glory and pride thine eyes are overshadowed. If thou wouldst grant me even the smallest corner in thy house, I could sing to thee to gladden thee when thou art weary; I could pray the Gods to bless thee without ceasing; I could minister to thee, worship thee, adore thee, with the love which asks no more than only to be near thee in humblest and most absolute devotion."

The King turned pale. Never before had any

woman dared to woo him; and it seemed the Gods had sent this gentle stranger to lighten his dark loneliness, and to heal the secret longings of his spirit. Surely she loved him with a deep immeasurable love; and could there be a gift more precious?

Swiftly his decision was made; and very tenderly he spoke.

"Nay, Giséla the Captive; no slave would I have. The woman who could delight me must be one my very soul could trust, even through life and death into the life beyond the stars. The brief pleasures of a fading love repel me; nor could I love thee for one single hour unless in my heart I felt I could for ever love thee."

From the depths of his soul came his words.

Never before had he spoken of love to any maiden.

And Giséla thought he was rejecting her; for not in her wildest dreams had she hoped that he might wed her as his Queen.

Yet such was the sudden resolution of his heart, even in the moment when it appeared to her he cast her sternly away and rejected her adoration.

"Alas, how poor and obscure am I!" she murmured. "Oh cruel Gods! Had I been born royal, then could the King have loved me!"

The misery in her voice touched Britric to the depths of his soul. All his pity for the helpless, all his latent intensity of passion, all the mingled fire and tenderness of his lonely heart surged up in waves of overpowering emotion which robbed him of speech, almost of sight. Out into the open sea a resistless current seemed to whirl him, as if to sweep him away from the maiden.

"Farewell, my King," said Giséla, in tones of such resigned and hopeless desolation that Britric suffered a pang of agony as if his body and his spirit were being rent asunder. For it seemed as if a jealous Fate, an evil spirit of the darkness, was tearing him and her apart even in the very moment when his love dawned into consciousness.

But Britric defied the Fates.

With a stifled cry he gathered her into his arms:

"My Beautiful One," he said, "My sweet dear Love; never shall the harsh world separate us. My protection hast thou craved; and my protection shalt thou have, now and for ever."

## CHAPTER VII

### FOREBODING

IT was a night of stars. The sea was calm.

Bathed in the bright light of the May moon, the placid waters, sleeping as if beneath the spell of an enchanter, seemed of molten silver.

Deep was the hush, as if the truce of the warring elements had touched even the restless heart of man. And Giséla, in a coracle alone with Britric, smiled and said, "How happy am I to-night. Would that this peace might last for ever!"

Britric rested on his oars and leaned forward, gazing into her eyes.

"My Belovèd One," he whispered, as if he feared to awaken some sleeping tempest, "Belovèd One, it is not on earth we can have peace for ever. War and struggle and sorrow are the lot of man."

Giséla looked at him in perplexity. Why should he speak of sorrow? Why brood on memories of war? Was he not victorious? Were not the wars

over? Why think of sacrifice and trial, on a tranquil evening, when all she craved was to be happy with him, in the solitude which was unity, in the peace which was ecstasy, in the love which throbbed with gladness?

"My King," she said, in her gentle caressing voice, "as a star to me art thou, even as the star is to the glow-worm! I marvel how the star came to earth! Verily thy love is a sweet miracle, blending my fitful light as of the trembling glow-worm with thy changeless light as from the Highest Heavens. Never in the world was any King and lover like thee; never any King so nobly strong and tender, so compassionate, so brave."

"Nay, Beautiful One," said Britric, "not great nor mighty am I; nor even learned; but a warrior seeking to rule justly and live valiantly. Could my Father's son do less?"

Giséla trailed her white hand in the water, and looked down at the sea, then up at the sky, before she answered;

"I know not how men are ruled; and to me the name of war means only terror. But in love of thee, my King, I am strong and ardent. From

*thee* flows all my delight, my hope, my very life. If thou didst cast me away I would die. I live but in thy favor. I am all thine; and thine I will be while I live. Even if at last thou weariest of my love, yet shall I never love another. Not brave am I, nor wise; my only wisdom is in my heart; and this heart, robbed of thine image, would be but as a broken casket, empty and despoiled of all its wealth."

Britric's hands gripped the oars more tightly, and his gray eyes sparkled.

"My Queen," he said in a low voice, trembling with the intensity of his emotion; "Never, never speak thus again. Thou woundest me, Belovèd, when thou dreamest I could weary of thee. Never would I fail thee. Though all the fiends of the Abyss rise up to tear us one from another, yet will I not forsake thee.'

"Hush," she said, "hush, hush; I am afraid for thee and for me, lest some evil spirit lure thee away. Do not leave me, my Belovèd. Do not let them take thee from me. Would that thou wert no King but a simple shepherd; then in peace might we dwell alone together, and not fear war,

nor treason, nor the hatred of demons or men."

Britric sighed. To crown her Queen he had opposed the will of the Chief Captain; he had stood resolutely firm against the prejudices of the Druids, he had foregone the chance of an alliance which would have brought gold to his coffers. And now she for whose sake he had defied the Druids and had mastered the Chief Captain, she, the captive he had crowned and enthroned, would fain be but a shepherdess!

He sighed at her perversity; but Giséla felt his thoughts, and looked at him with the same piteous imploring glances that had first bewitched him.

"Be not angry," she pleaded; "very poor and weak was I; little meriting thy grace. But thy love redeems me; thy love shall teach me, strengthen me, inspire me. For thee I will be brave; for thee I will learn to be a Queen, thine own true Queen. Thou wert born to rule and conquer. Forgive me, my Lord, my Love, that I am yet so far beneath thee."

Britric trembled. Never in the face of a foe had he felt this sinking at his heart. But he feared for Giséla. She seemed too fragile for the world,

too delicate; how would she fare if he were slain and she left unprotected?

"When thou goest to war again," she said in her exquisitely tender voice, "every moment will be as an hour to me, every hour a day, every day a year, while thou art absent. As a mirror of steel am I, radiant when *thou*, my King, art seen reflected in the soul that loves thee; but when thy presence is withdrawn, the mirror, gray and empty, loses all life and beauty."

Britric's heart throbbed almost to suffocation. Lonely as he was, with not one friend he could trust, not one being to whom he could speak out his mind, this woman's love was to him so precious that it seemed divine.

"Belovèd," he said, "never would I be absent from thee. Love knows no absence; love can pierce through space. Though I shall go many times to war if foemen menace my people, yet thou shalt be ever with me, throned in my heart. Thy love shall give new strength to my arm. To know I fight to keep *thee* safe and tranquil, to keep away from thee all terror, menace, ugliness, and clashing anger, my sword shall be as a thousand swords, my

spear unerring in aim, my courage deathless. Say not thou wouldst be deprived of me; say not thou cravest for me to be a simple shepherd. A King I was born, and a King's royal burden I must bear without complaining. The wind blows vehemently upon lofty places; vain is it for Kings to crave the sheltered peace of the humble! But I would bring into this kingdom such a rule of justice and true mercy that never again shall my people serve the Gods through crouching fear; nor the cruel word sacrifice be heard from the lips of the powerful, mocking the weak and helpless. For the God I worship is as loving as He is resplendent."

Giséla lifted her drooping eyelids and gazed at her husband. Very beautiful and noble he appeared; but strange, and different from other men. Sometimes she almost feared him; but her heart swelled with pride to think that she, even she, Giséla the slave, obscure and timid, could with a look or a word play on his emotions as a musician plays on a harp. The moment she threw herself at his feet when first she beheld him, she had felt the power of her defenseless weakness to touch his compassionate heart.

But there was none other like him; this she repeated to herself. And with her love and adoration there mingled a dread lest some day his deep tenderness might ensnare and destroy him.

Reason and foresight Giséla had little; but as the beasts of the field know when the storm is approaching ere its violence breaks over-head, so did she feel that Britric's generosity would draw upon himself and her some crushing sorrow, unless he could be warned in time and think no more of his strange God. Safer would it be to worship the old Gods of the Druids!

"My Own," she said, "my King; thou speakest of a God not as the other Gods. But verily if the Arch-Priest discover that thou secretly adorest One to whom *he* sacrifices not, then might he blast thee with his curses, and drive thee from the throne, and tear me away from thee, Belovèd, and leave me desolate for ever."

Again Britric's eyes flashed, and his face grew stern and rigid.

"Fear not, my Queen," he said; "the Unknown God shall yet be King over all Gods; and when the hour comes for Him to shine forth in the splendor

of His greatness, nevermore shall sacrifices bleed on the altars. With harp and song and offerings of fragrant blossoms shall He be greeted; for He desires mercy, not harsh sacrifice! And men shall serve Him because so glorious is He that only to know Him is to love and worship."

"And hast thou seen Him?" said Giséla.

"Never any of mortal race has yet beheld Him," answered Britric; "but in my dreams a voice has whispered that I, even I, shall see Him,—though when or where I know not."

A soft wind rippled the surface of the waters and touched Giséla's face as with a lover's sweet caress. But she shivered, though the night was warm. Britric's hope and fervor wakened no answering echo in her heart; for as he spoke it seemed as if the face of the Arch-Druid came between her and her husband, and sheer terror seized her.

Britric saw her shiver, and he bent to the oars and very tenderly he said, "Thou art weary, my Sweet One, and thy great love makes thee fear for me. But the day shall come when no longer will I whisper in secret my worship of the Unknown

God, but will proclaim it to my people even with trumpets and with clarions. Till then, Soul of my Soul, keep hidden in thy breast these hopes I breathe unto thee only. Pray that the day of victory may be hastened, the victory of love over dark hate and fear. Cherish my hopes, Belovèd, for I would have thee one with me, one spirit, so that when our mortal life is ended, together we may rise into the Everlasting Sunlight. What were love if the cruel grave could quench it?"

Then Giséla shuddered again and said, "My Lord, my King; speak not of the grave. Is not our life joyous? Art thou not happy? Do I not love thee enough? *Thou* art my God; none other God do I desire! For ever could I gaze on thee in adoration."

"Fain would I deserve thy love," said Britric humbly. And so beautiful she seemed in his eyes that he revered her as a gift from the Immortals, too sweet and delicate to be of this rude earth. And Britric loved her more and more trustingly, and worshiped her as if she were a messenger from Heaven.

## CHAPTER VIII

### TREASON

IT was mid noon in blossoming April; but three torches were burning, for the hidden council chamber of the Druids was in a cavern deep down under the earth, whither never a sunbeam penetrated.

Alone together were the black-bearded Arch-Druid and the tall Chief Captain, in a secret consultation. Kinsfolk were they. Of all the Captains of the Guard none only save this Captain was in league with the High Priest; none save he alone of all the warriors had penetrated the mystery of the cavernous depths.

"'Tis but a matter of time," said the Arch-Druid; "Wait! Britric will wreck himself. Already his passion for the slave girl clouds his judgment."

The Chief Captain laughed; and his laugh echoed and reëchoed in the gloomy cavern.

"Very foolish is Britric," said he; "in the daugh-

ter of a slave he seeks the virtues that scarce would he find in a Queen,—save only one, and that one is dead long since. Well enough is Giséla for those who would use her as a slave. But Britric is bewitched; he adores the Phœnician's base-born offspring even as a goddess! Mad is he; stark mad. And is there not a law of the Gods by which a mad King may be stripped of crown and scepter?"

The Arch-Druid pondered; "Thou wouldst dethrone young Britric," he said curtly; "and thou desirest this woman for thine own?"

"More wisely than Britric should I handle her," murmured the Chief Captain.

"Thou hatest her?" questioned the Druid.

"Nay, I love her!" protested the Chief Captain.

The Arch-Druid shrugged; "I thank the High Gods *I* am lifted above these earthly loves and hatreds," he said. "No desires have I, save only to voice the will of the Most Holy, and advance the welfare of the realm. And Britric imperils the peace of the realm. He is teaching men to think, to question, to aspire! Very unwise is he,—and through this people he is awakening, he shall be wrecked. But learn thou humility, my cousin;

forget not that the Gods, and the priests of the Gods, rank very far above the Captain-in-Chief, even though Britric be smitten of the Gods."

"But though Britric die, a King shall reign," said the Chief Captain; "a King grown wise with years while unimpaired in strength; a King who knows the art of kingcraft better far than this poor love-sick Britric. Loyal to the crown am I; ever must it be upheld,—even though Britric perish."

"Wait," said the Druid; "for the people all adore young Britric. Never in the memory of man in Western Alba has a King been more beloved and honored. But the populace are fickle, the populace are cowards. Can we brand their King as a blasphemer, then shall the Gods deliver him into our hands! For though the people trust in Britric, though they love him, yet do they greatly fear the Gods. And by fear the world is ruled, and ever will be."

"Yea," said the Chief Captain bluntly; "yea, our fear lest Britric grow more mighty than ourselves, is what so sorely irks us. But were he tame and meek, and little loved, then might we leave him in peace. The more swiftly the High

Gods can smite him, the more freely thou and I will breathe on earth! Let us entrap him soon, ere he grow to a stature that must o'ertop us all. Well do I know men; better by far than thou, for I know them in the field of action. And I tell thee, save only his mad infatuation for this slave woman, and his foolishness in deeming gentle mercy a weapon more potent than strong terror, Britric had been a King such as the Gods themselves had honored!"

"I marvel thou so lovest Britric," said the Druid.

"Nay, I hate him. I hated his Mother. As a being from another world did she walk this earth. Fallen and degraded I felt in her presence; and never for *that* can I forgive her, dead or living!"

The Chief Captain gripped his dagger with a gesture of rage and despair:

"Hard of heart art thou," he said, "and passionless as an image of stone. Never for any woman wouldst thou imperil thy precious soul, so entirely dost thou love thy sacred self! But I—"

He broke off abruptly, and his dark face grew livid.

"At last thou shalt learn my secret," he hissed;

"If I tell it not, my brain will go on fire! Madly I loved her."

"Whom didst thou love?"

"The Queen, my Master's wife, the Mother of this Britric. Had she loved me I would have scaled the starry Heavens for her sake; or crawled in the Abyss of Darkness if there I could have won her."

"She abhorred thee?" said the Druid.

The Chief Captain groaned; "Nay, she *pitied!* Even now I dream of her eyes, sad and rebuking. *'I trusted thee,'* she said; *'so fail me not! Thou wert born to be loyal and noble. Be not ignoble.'* Thus spake she, and I was abashed and humbled. And Britric's eyes, even as his Mother's eyes, drive me to frenzy. For whene'er he looks on me, be it rebukingly or trustingly, he opens the old wound in my heart; and then in the same moment I love him and I hate him."

The Arch-Druid's face changed not, nor softened. He felt no pity for the Chief Captain; only sheer contempt that a strong warrior should squander his forces in so profitless a self-tormenting.

"Wherefore didst thou not reveal this malady

more early," he remonstrated; "a potion can I give thee, a magical cup of oblivion,—so that thy very memory of the Queen shall be effaced."

"Nay, nay," said the Chief Captain, "brew me no potions! Robbed of her memory I should grow old. The fire of my life would sink to ashes. Ask me not to forget her. That will I never do."

The Arch-Druid inwardly gave thanks to the Gods, for in the tempestuous spirit of the Captain-in-Chief, who swayed from one extreme of passion to the other, he saw an instrument he would use in carving Britric's fate.

A torch flared up, then flickered, then was utterly extinguished.

Reverently the Druid bowed his head;

"The will of the Gods is foretold. The light of Britric's fame shall vanish! Behold that torch, the symbol of his kingship! Without storm or tempest or breath of man it has been quenched. So shall it be with the glory of young Britric! But the hour is not yet come."

# PART THREE

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CRUCIAL TEST

NOT thirteen moons had waxed and waned since the King's marriage; and Giséla yet was ecstatically happy in her husband's love.

Though the Druids were chill and scornful to the base-born Queen, and much she feared them, and trembled lest they blight her with a sickness, the love of Britric was as sunshine, giving her strength to rise above her fears.

But the days of her delight were numbered,—though she knew it not.

On Beltane Eve the dark Arch-Druid read in the stars that the land was threatened with a famine; for the Gods, he said, were angered that so long had the sacrificial stones been watered only with blood of goats and rams and bulls and heifers. Vain would it be to hope for mercy from the outraged Gods, unless the people would give willingly even of their best, their fairest, their most

pure. And so, in solemn secret council, the Wise Ones said and declared, each to the other, that seven beautiful maidens should be sacrificed; but first should these fair ones pass a night in the sacred place where the Gods could come to them.

In low tones spake the Druids, for although the King was leagues away, and hunting in the forest, the memory of his stern eyes troubled their souls, and they feared him.

"Powerless is the King to oppose our authority. Shall we not put the knife into his hand to perform the sacred slaughter as his father did before him; and shall he not carry the torch to light the holy fire? With his own hand he shall sacrifice to the Gods, and do our bidding humbly."

So spake they; and yet they were uneasy; for though Britric was so courteous, yet his eyes never quailed beneath the eyes of the Arch-Druid, nor was his will swayed this way or that, not even by the words of the Most Holy when they revealed to him portents in the stars, signs in the eternal Heavens.

"The King returns not from the forest until sunset," said a feeble-voiced Druid, white-haired and

withered of body but very subtle of mind. "Let us send forth the order for the sacrifice even this very hour; for if we wait to ask him *'Shall it be?'*, he will say, *'Offer instead the bulls and heifers.'* But if the high command of the Gods goes out ere Britric comes back from his hunting, then shall it be too late for his voice to demur or make confusion."

And the Arch-Druid, younger by twenty years, and strong, and very dark and brooding, inclined his head and answered,

"The Gods speak through thee, my venerable father. Let it be even as thou hast devised."

. . . . . .

Home came the King with his warriors from the hunting. Gaily they returned; for the chase had wearied them not, but rather refreshed them in their fiery vigor. And into the Queen's room, where she sat with her maidens, came the King,—as eager to greet her as in the first days of their life together.

A sign of her white hand bade her attendants withdraw; and with a languorous grace she arose and prostrated herself before her Lord and Monarch, saying, "Lo, I am thy slave."

But he raised her and embraced her, and whispered tenderly, "My Queen."

In his arms she nestled, and sighed with delight, and half-closed her eyes while he caressed her.

Then, in her soft and gentle tones she murmured,

"In thine absence, the Wise Ones have sent forth a decree, my Britric, a command which *thou* wilt like not."

And she told him how the trumpeters of the Arch-Druid had proclaimed to all the people that next day at noon the King with his own hand would offer sacrifices to the Gods.

Britric's eyes flashed, though as yet he knew not that the sacrifices would be other than the ram or the goat, or the wild white bull.

Neither did the Queen know the nature of the sacrifice. Nor to the crowd had the Druids proclaimed it. By stealth did they go at dusk, and one by one selected the maidens, and carried them away, forbidding the parents to cry out or murmur, under pain of being smitten with a leprosy which blights the bold profane ones who question the will of the High Gods!

Yet though the Queen knew nought of the secret

scheming of the Druids, she shivered when she looked up at her husband's face and saw in his eyes that sword-bright flash which frightened even while it thrilled her, for she knew it meant that he was angry.

. . . . . .

It was mid-noon of Beltane feast-day. With harps and trumpets came the bards, clad in their azure mantles; and behind them the novices in white. And up to the Sacrificial Stones they marched, singing and chanting in honor of the Gods.

Within the sacred circle waited and watched the Holiest Ones, the wise initiates, who could read the lore of the stars, and forecast the hidden future, and could heal or smite at will.

And in their midst was an enormous cage of wicker, veiled in a wrapping of silk of Phœnicia, and mounted on an unlit fire. With logs and twigs and sun-dried mosses had the fire been laid by a skilled hand; and oil had been poured on the wood that it might burn the more swiftly when the torch should be applied. But not yet was it revealed what nature of victims were captive in the cage.

No sound came from the cage, and the multitude listened in vain for the lowing of the heifers or the roaring of angry bulls. With a potion had the victims been dulled to silent acquiescence in their doom.

At the High Altar stood the Arch-Priest, with the Wise Ones grouped behind and around the central stone in a half-circle; and again in a half-circle stood the bards, and behind the bards the novices. And they waited for Britric the King.

The sun was high in the Heavens, and the crowd had assembled ere a hunting horn rang out with three notes, and three again, the signal that the King was coming.

Hand in hand with the Queen he came. Very noble and stately his bearing; and she so modest and gentle, so sweet and so gracious, that men scarce recalled how her mother had been but a slave.

From her head there floated a veil of shimmering gossamer; and gems gleamed in her dark hair. Her robe was broidered with roses of gold for the sun, and leaves of silver for the moon. Her lips were red as a rose, though her face was pallid.

Behind the King and Queen walked thrice ten of the King's own Guards, the tall Chief Captain at their head; and so intent was the crowd on the faces of Britric and his Queen, that none remarked how the Captain of the Guard was gazing on the Queen, and how his cavernous eyes were glittering with evil fires.

Facing the circle of the stones was a chair of state for the King and a smaller one for the Queen; and the King led his Queen to her place; but himself he seated not.

With swift swinging strides he entered the circle of stones; and the Guards stood back and waited around the throne of the Queen.

To the altar strode Britric, and bowed his knee and bent his stately head; and silently he prayed, while the black-bearded Arch-Druid stood touching him with the potent wand, so that it seemed to the populace as if the King were kneeling to the Druid and not to the Invisible Gods.

Silent were the bards, and breathless the young novices; and eagerly they watched and waited, though as yet they knew not what manner of creatures the Holy Ones had concealed in the mon-

strous cage which stood enshrouded in its silken cover.

The King rose from his knees. Then the Arch-Druid lifted his arms and waved his wand, and in a loud voice he said, so that all the crowd could hear,

"Famine threatens the land. Not yet the blight has fallen; but in the stars I have seen that it *shall* fall, unless the Gods may be persuaded to take back their anger. Much have I prayed to the Most High; and the answer came, *'Purity and beauty do we love; we the Immortal Gods demand seven mortal maidens.'* Then did I, the servant of the Gods, led by the voices of the Gods, choose the seven purest and most fair young virgins in the realm. And even as the moon rose high in the Heavens, the Gods descended to the virgins; and the blight well-nigh has been averted. But know ye that those whom the Gods have embraced are holy and must die; no more must the seven maidens breathe the polluted air of this world of sinners, for the favor of the Gods has sanctified them! To the Gods they must belong for ever."

A hush was on the crowd; and even the warriors

of the Guard were awed and bent their proud heads.

But Britric the King turned pale with the white-hot pallor of wrath, and his eyes shone like the blade of a sword unsheathed in the sunlight.

Yet no man marked his anger, for the eyes of each and all were gazing towards the cage, veiled in its wrappings of silk from the marts of distant Phœnicia.

At a sign from the all-powerful Arch-Druid, two aged Druids pulled back the silken veils; and then the people beheld within the cage seven maidens,—fair and lovely last night, but ashen with terror to-day.

In robes of white were they clad, and their trembling limbs could be seen of the multitude, for their garments were as the clouds which on summer nights float dreamily across the pale face of the Moon and yet conceal her not.

Into the King's hand the Arch-Druid put the sacred knife; and the King gripped it firmly.

"Three to fall by the knife," said the voice of the High Priest, "for blood must flow on the altar. And two to offer to the flames, for the purifying spirits of the Fire must be wooed and appeased.

And one to be cast into the Waves, lest the God of the Sea be jealous of his brethren. Then the last shall be buried in the Earth, to make the seasons fruitful. So shall the realm be saved and the Immortal Gods be pacified."

As the Arch-Druid spoke, the oldest of the Druids brought forward a lighted torch in readiness for the King to thrust into the well-laid fire.

But the King heeded not.

To the door of the cage he went; swiftly he opened it, and in a clear strong voice he called his Guards into the sacred circle; and the crowd marvelled, for never had this been done before.

Then, one by one, from out the cage the King in his stalwart arms lifted each maiden, and to each he said gently, "Fear not."

But they only trembled the more.

Their limbs gave way beneath them, and they fell face downwards at the foot of the altar.

Then the people wondered anew, for the cage was left empty, though the Arch-Priest had said there were two to be burned in the cage.

Grim as an image of iron stood the mighty Arch-Druid, the Absolute,—and his eyes seemed to reach

to the soul of the multitude as though even as one man the crowd must sway to his will.

The Queen on her throne trembled and shivered, for an agony of terror gripped her. Her gaze was fixed on the fearless face of her husband. Never had she loved him more than in this moment; never had she feared so greatly for his life and hers and all their joy.

"My people," the King said, and his voice, silvery, clear, resounding, was as a trumpet,—"The time of sacrifice is ended, and the age of mercy has begun. In the name of the Most High God, the God of Gods, the King of Kings, I proclaim these maidens shall go free. Nevermore shall the blood of human victims flow on this altar; never again shall the innocent bleed for the guilty, for the Most High God is just; He would have each one among ye repent himself of his own sins, not seek salvation through the massacre of tender maidens."

Then rose a howl from all the Druids; and, at a sign from the Arch-Priest, the Captain of the Guard stealthily came behind the King, and smote him suddenly and swiftly with a mace of iron; so

suddenly, so swiftly, that in an instant Britric fell to the ground.

Then the throng of Druids closed around him shrieking,

"Blasphemy, blasphemy!"

And the voice of the Chief Captain of the Guard was mingled with the voices of the Druids,

"Death to the defiler! Death to him who mocks the Gods."

The crowd took up the cry, "Death, Death!"

And the multitude of voices beat on the ears of the King like the roar of savage beasts.

Then the darkness came upon him, and he knew no more.

## CHAPTER X

### THE PRICE OF VALOR

WHEN the King opened his eyes he opened them on blackness.

Around him was a silence as of the grave.

He strove to stir, but a weight of lead seemed to press upon him. He struggled to throw it off, but he was so tightly bound that a log scarcely would have been more helpless.

The pain in his head was acute; and across the darkness he saw jagged flashes of fiery red light, which tortured his eyes and stabbed them.

He understood then that his head was wounded; and again came bright red flashes, arrows of pain.

He had no means of judging whether it was an hour, a day, or a lifetime, since he had been smitten down at the High Altar in the very moment when he felt his heart glow with unconquerable courage,—courage which seemed to come from the Unknown God to strengthen and inspire him.

Yet even in that instant he had been stricken, and stricken from behind.

But by whom?

That his wound had been dealt by the Chief Captain of his Guard never entered his thoughts as possible. From Druids he was prepared for hate and treachery; but in warriors he looked only to find loyalty and frankness. Nor did he understand that the black-browed Captain never had ceased to covet Giséla for his own, nor had ever forgiven—nor would ever forgive—the King for wedding her.

Britric could not put his hand to his throbbing head. The thongs binding his arms to his sides were wound round him so that he could scarcely breathe.

He sickened with a sudden terror for the fate of Giséla. Before her very eyes he had been smitten; and the Unknown God had sent no aid or comfort.

And now Britric strove to discover where he had been prisoned. He listened for any sound which might aid him; but sound there was none. Had the Druids buried him, living, in one of the ancient

tombs deep underground? And would he never again come forth into the light of the sun?

To starve, to rot, to molder,—must such be his hideous fate?

In agony of longing, his heart cried out for Giséla. To see her but for one moment, even in a dream, he thought, would renew his hope and courage, and help him to forget his pain.

He closed his eyes, and wondered how many days it would take him to die? Every nerve in his body, all the vigor of his spirit, rebelled against such a death, lingering, passive, helpless. It seemed the more horrible in proportion to his youth, his strength, and to the hopes which had been so noble, so ardent, so aspiring. Surely it could not be that his God would thus forsake him.

A grating sound smote on his ear. Like a blow it seemed in the silence.

Then a dazzle of lights, and the smoke of torches, and the treading of sandalled feet came around him.

He set his face sternly, and opened his eyes the wider. Bound and helpless as he was, he was

yet the King; so his eyes must never quail nor waver.

The intruders crowded around him, a score or more of Druids; and he saw that although he was so closely bound, and they were twenty to one, they grasped their curved knives and looked at him as if they feared him.

But in the face of the Arch-Druid there was no sign of fear, but a relentless hatred.

"Unbind Britric the madman," he said, "and let him stand for his trial. The Gods condemn none unheard."

With their knives the Druids cut all the thongs; but Britric was not able to rise alone. It was the iron arm of the Arch-Druid which pulled him up and hurled him against the wall, where he stood with torches flaming full on him. His tormentors, he knew, would gloat over every change in the expression of his face; so he prayed silently to his God to give him unwavering power of self-command.

On a bench of ancient stone the Arch-Druid seated himself. The wand of office was in his hand.

"Britric, son of Britric," he said, "hast thou aught to plead in thy defense?"

The King made no answer. He was thinking; but the pain in his head made thinking more difficult than to have played sweet music in a roaring storm.

"Wilt thou do penance at the Altar of the Most High, and retract thy words, and pray to the Gods to pardon thy blasphemies and heal thee of thy madness?"

Thus spake the Arch-Druid.

But still the King was silent. Fervently in his heart he prayed to the Unknown God to show him how to answer his accusers.

But the Heavens were deaf and dumb.

"Wilt thou, O Britric, swear and pronounce before thy people that thou wilt abase thyself, and bow in perfect humility to the decrees of the Gods, pronounced by *me* their Consecrated and Inspired One?"

Then came the King's voice, abruptly, and very clearly,

"That will I never do; for not yet knowest thou the true God."

The Arch-Druid gave no reply in words, but he made a sign with his wand. Then the most aged of the Druids held, on a long stick, close to the King's face, a sponge soaked with a strongly smelling liquid. And the King's head fell forward, and he staggered.

They seized him again and laid him on the ground, inert and helpless; nor could Britric understand what they were doing; he knew only that as the fumes from the sponge mounted to his brain, the control of his limbs deserted him and his eyes were darkened.

On the ground he lay as if dead.

"We will do it now," said the Arch-Druid; "the Gods are merciful. While he sleeps, the red hot irons shall brand him. Then when he awaken, if the wounds are healed ere noonday, this will show the Gods forgive him. But if ere mid-noon the touch of my sacred wand can heal him not, then will he be proved unclean, accursèd. And if he be accursèd, no longer can he reign, lest he corrupt the realm, and bring disaster even upon *us* the holy."

Of mercy the Druid had spoken; but he had

closed the King's eyes and plunged him in deep slumber not from pity, nor to spare him torment, but because Britric's eyes, so keen, so steady, fearless even when face to face with infamy and death, smote into the minds of the Druids a horrible fear lest Britric's Unknown God might descend in their midst, and blast them with His thunder.

But now that the King's eyes were closed, they feared him and his God no longer.

A sign from the Arch-Druid, and an inner door was opened, and within was seen a brazier, with many irons heating in the fire; and the irons were red hot.

Stretching out a claw-like hand, the most aged of the Druids, trembling with excitement, strove to unfasten the King's white and golden tunic; then in his impatience he took his knife and slashed at it and tore it away.

But the drug was potent, and the King lay as in a deep sleep.

While his body slept his spirit wakened. He dreamt he was a boy again; and his mother was bending over him with a look of exquisite tenderness.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE BITTER CUP

TO come back from sleep to waking, was for Britric to fall from a region of light and wonderful changeless love into an abyss of darkness and appalling anguish.

And in the dark he could hear a piteous sobbing, and a stifled voice which was saying, "No, no; do not force me to look on him! I cannot bear it! What have you done? . . . Ah, how hideous! . . . Take me away!"

It was Giséla's voice.

Britric opened his eyes; and, with an effort which sent arrows of agony shooting through his whole frame even from his head to the soles of his feet, he raised himself and sat upright.

"Hush, my Queen," he said, "they shall not hurt thee."

At the sound of her voice almost he forgot how

powerless he was to save her. So habituated was he to help the helpless, that as soon as he heard Giséla weeping, he promised relief and comfort.

The torches were flaring, and their fumes filled the stifling dungeon. For a moment he thought he must be dreaming. But it was no dream.

Giséla stood in a far corner, shrinking back against the wall and turning her head away as if the light of the torches hurt her eyes. And beside, with one hand on her shoulder, stood the dark Arch-Druid; and on her other side the aged white-haired Druid, with his claw-like hand gripping her tightly.

"Look upon Britric," they said, speaking together, one in the querulous tone of extreme age; the other in a voice so vigorous that each word was like a blow.

But Giséla shuddered, and put up her hands to cover her eyes, as she wailed, "I cannot bear to see those cruel wounds. Take me away!"

Then Britric's anger flamed forth:

"Ye infamous cowards," he raged; "unhand the Queen and treat her with reverence. No matter what torment your tyranny may work on *me*, she shall go scathless."

There was a moment's hush, broken only by Giséla's sobbing.

Then the Arch-Druid spoke, slowly, deliberately: "Yesterday thou wert King," he said, "O Britric, son of Britric. But the Gods have smitten thee with a madness to chastise thy blasphemy. Therefore shalt thou reign no more. Nor may a madman embrace a wife, lest demons of madness enter his offspring and destroy the woman."

A shriek of horror from Giséla rang out and echoed and reëchoed.

Then again there was silence; and at last, quavering, tremulously, yet with an implacable hostility, the oldest Druid spoke to the Queen:

"Thou hearest, Woman! He is mad! Though his crown and sword are reft from him, and his body branded with the marks of the accursèd, yet still he deems himself a King; and shamelessly gives orders to the Holiest Ones as if to the slaves of his own household!"

Britric still sat upright, supporting himself with his hands. His arms were throbbing and burning in an agony which brought drops of sweat to his brow; his breast was as if wild beasts were tear-

ing at it with poisoned fangs. But he held his head high, and in a strong level voice he said,

"Giséla, my Beautiful One, be brave! Little do I fear the fury these deluded ones wreak on my body. The God of Gods is just, and will deliver me yet, if I flinch not nor waver. But as for *them*, —at the Last Day they shall cover their faces in shame, and feel in their souls the pangs of a remorse more burning than any torment I can suffer in my body."

But the Queen looked at her husband with eyes which were glazing in terror; and the ancient Druid in his high tremulous voice said again, "Behold, he is mad. He blasphemes against the chosen priests of the Gods!"

Britric seemed not to hear.

"Sweet Love," he said, "one kiss from thee and I shall forget my pain. For pain dies with the body, but true love lives for ever. Not all the griefs and storms of the earth can quench it."

But Giséla stood helpless, gripped on each shoulder by the King's tormentors; nor did she answer one single word.

"Release the Queen," said Britric again.

The habit of command was not to be broken in a moment; and now there was scorn as well as majesty in his voice. Long had he doubted the heavenly inspiration of the Druids, and his doubt had grown to certainty that the initiates were but men, —without the virtues of men, which are valor, loyalty, and justice.

Again the Arch-Druid spoke, and his voice grated with a furious anger little befitting one who boasted of wisdom from on high;

"Hearken, Giséla the Queen," he said, "see how the demon of madness rages in this outcast who was once thy husband! Go not near him, lest he turn and rend thee, and drag thee down with him into everlasting darkness where all Kings shall go who mock the Gods."

Then Giséla cast towards her husband a fleeting look of piteous yearning and such abject terror that it crossed his mind to wonder if they had indeed bewildered her to madness.

Yet his love should shatter their evil spell; never would he surrender.

With an effort which seemed to tear every sinew

in his body, he rose to his feet and held out his arms to Giséla.

"Be not afraid, my True Love," he said, "for the Unknown God has power to save us even now. And so greatly do I prize thee, that my love shall be as a magic garment wrapped around thee to protect thee from all evil. Cast away fear, Belovèd One. Be brave as befits the wife of a King and warrior. For the end is not yet."

But Giséla, frozen with fear, trembled and shuddered and made no answer. Britric gazed at her adoringly, looking to see brave love and mute encouragement in her dark eyes. But her eyes were dull and cloudy; and again she turned her face away.

Then Britric's arms fell by his sides, and an icy chill came over him. With a terrible distinctness he saw that she whom he had worshiped, she whom he had crowned and enthroned, was no bright starry spirit, no Queen of everlasting Love, but a weak, wavering, earthy woman.

Fear had driven love out of her heart; and even as a straw in the wind seemed the soul of Giséla.

On the Arch-Druid's face there showed a flush of triumph.

"The Gods speak through the Queen," he said; "Vile and unclean art thou, O Britric, and the marriage between ye twain is dissolved for ever. Neither on this earth, nor in the underworld of darkness shalt thou possess this woman. Of her own free choice she hath renounced thee; and the bond was broken in the name of the Most High Gods ere ever thine erstwhile Queen came into thy presence this day."

Then Britric's heart was as if turned to water; his hope, his very manhood seemed to fail him. He felt as if the spirit which had sustained him with a strength as from the Unknown God, had vanished in an instant even as Giséla's love had vanished.

Blindly he stretched up his arms to his God who had forsaken him. Then he swayed, tottered, and fell.

As one dead he lay.

And the Druids loosed their grip of Giséla.

She turned on the tormentors:

"Ye have killed him," she said, "ye have killed

him! The Gods are cruel! Britric was kind. Never a harsh word did I hear from him; and never will any love me as he loved."

On her knees she flung herself beside her husband's body, and she bent down trembling to kiss him.

But before her lips could touch his unconscious face, the Arch-Druid dragged her backward;

"Thy soul," he said, "thy soul! For ever will it be accursèd if thou defilest thyself by touching this doomed one! Severed is every link between ye twain. Not the Gods themselves can re-unite ye. But into the pit of darkness can the demons drag thee, even this instant, if thou art disobedient unto *me*, the mouthpiece of the Gods."

With a wail of misery Giséla broke into most bitter sobbing.

"Why did I ever love him?" she cried. "How unhappy am I! How cruel are the Gods! I hate them!"

"Hush," said the Arch-Druid.

## CHAPTER XII

### DESOLATION

WHEN Giséla turned her face away, in that moment it seemed to Britric as if the flame of his spirit blazed up in a funeral pyre, then died down to a heap of ashes.

Torture, disaster, treason, the malice of man, and the anger of the Gods, even the silence of the Unknown God, he had endured, unflinching. But that Giséla, at the bidding of the Druids, could abandon him without one word of love or of farewell,—Giséla in whom was all his trust, she whom he had crowned as his Queen when any other in his place would have claimed a captor's rights and kept her his slave, she into whose care he had given the keeping of his heart, the secrets of his soul,—that she could abandon him, and at the bidding of the one she feared and hated, was a shock so overwhelming that it had seemed to shatter even his cherished dream of an Unknown God. Well had

he striven to serve this God; yet the God of Love had left him utterly defenseless.

Already he felt the shadow of that everlasting darkness to which the sinister Arch-Druid would condemn him before to-morrow's sun had reached its zenith. In the midst of his people, and in view of his own warriors he had led to victory, would he be pronounced accursèd.

Nor would a single one amongst them dare to show grief for his fate, nor to salute him, nor speak any word with him after the fatal sentence.

Yet all this he could have borne had Giséla truly loved him!

That she would turn her face away, that she could renounce him in his darkest hour,—this he would never have believed, not even if a God from the High Heavens had foretold it.

Constant himself, and steadfast, loving with a love which neither change nor chance could shatter, little could he understand how in a moment his Belovèd had so changed from adoration to aversion, from a glowing ardor to an icy terror.

Valiant as he was, and resolute, most resolute of all when threatened, he marvelled how her love

could die like a summer flower broken in the winter storm-wind. Far otherwise had his Mother loved his Father, with a love deepened and strengthened by time and adversity.

Sick at heart was Britric to discover that his Queen he had adored as a pure being from the skies, was weak and shallow. Branded upon his soul as with a red hot iron, burning more cruelly than any wounds upon his tortured body, were the words "Giséla is a coward! a coward! Yea, a coward!"

Yet he loved her still; but the joyous love was turned to shame and anguish.

In his misery he searched to find some reason, some excuse, for her desertion. Then he told himself that even his warriors would flinch in fear of the Arch-Druid; and if warriors could fear, how should a trembling woman be brave?

Ah, but love might have inspired her with valor!

As Britric lay on the dungeon floor, deserted and betrayed, doomed to a punishment far worse than death, a living death, even in that darkest hour the thought that Giséla might not be so base, so

heartless, so callous as she seemed, came like a breath of pure fresh air which fanned to life the one spark hidden in the ashes of his hopes.

The Druids had cast on her a spell of terror. On *them* be the blame! She was a helpless victim! How gladly would he forgive her; how ardently he yearned to comfort and uphold her! If she would come to him for one short hour, even one little hour, before the sentence was pronounced that was to cut him off from human intercourse for ever, he would forgive her so entirely that again she would look trustingly, adoringly, into his eyes.

Even in the very jaws of doom true love might conquer; for if Giséla would speak to him one word of love, if she would vow to cherish his memory in her secret heart, if she would promise to pray for him to his Unknown God, then into exile, into the Dark Abyss itself, he would carry with him the memory of love, nor feel entirely forsaken.

Night wore onwards to dawn, and Britric at last fell into an unquiet sleep. In a desert he seemed to wander, and his limbs were feeble as in extreme old age. With the aid of a staff he dragged him-

self over the burning sands beneath a pitiless sky, glaring as molten brass. His tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, and he staggered and fell, and lay on the scorching sands; nor could he rise.

As he lay there, parched with thirst, in his dream he saw Giséla.

And he cried aloud to her, "Belovèd One, I perish. Give me one word of love! Then can I die believing in the truth of woman, and in the mercy of the Hidden God."

But Gisèla either heeded not or heard not.

Then Britric the King cried a second time, "My Belovèd, come to me; I die of thirst and desolation. One word of love were more to me now than all the wealth of the world. Give me but one word, one look!"

Giséla hesitated; glanced furtively at him; then shuddered, paled, and trembled.

And again she turned her face away.

## CHAPTER XIII

### WOMAN'S LOVE

WHILE Britric the King lay motionless on the dungeon floor, waiting the dawn which was to bring him added torments, Giséla tossed lonely on her bed, and wept for her own desolation.

How often she had murmured rapturously to Britric of her love, her joy, her peace, her adoration! But to-night she trembled in abject penitence for her sin in having dared to adore a man accursèd of the Gods and doomed to everlasting darkness.

Had she not turned away and utterly renounced her husband, then would the voice of the Gods have driven her forth with him into the wilderness.

She would have had her queenly robes torn off before the multitude; and, clad in the coarse black garb of infamy, she would have shared the horrors of the curse. This frightful fate would have engulfed her had she dared to grant her husband the one sweet word of love he craved.

And yet she could not blot out the memory of his pleading voice, and of his eyes, sword-bright and shining.

Unrepentant, proud, unchanged, was Britric; not broken by the torture, nor terrified by the impending curse. Verily, she thought, a demon must have entered his stately form and utterly possessed it, for never a mortal man could have faced so frightful a curse and neither quailed nor quavered!

Very passionately had Giséla loved her King and husband in the brief day of his glory. But the wise all-potent Druids had bidden her choose between this mortal lover, helpless, bound, and doomed, and the Eternal Gods, throned in a might none could resist, Gods who could save or slay, Gods whose favors were lavish but whose wrath was unpitying.

What could she do?

No longer could Britric the King protect her. Even himself he could not save.

Doomed had he been since his birth, the Druid said. The wife who was one flesh with him must share in his doom, unless she would renounce him, and, in prayer, fasting and penitence, be purified

from the mortal sin of having loved a man abhorred of the Gods.

Giséla shut her eyes and buried her face in her pillows. But not yet could she shut out the anguished memory of the fearful moment when the grim Arch-Druid had compelled her to repeat the cruel formula of separation:

*"I, Giséla the Queen, renounce Britric, once my husband and my King, but King no more. And in the name of the High Gods I cast him off. To the Light I go; but he to the eternal darkness. Every bond between us now is broken; he accursèd, and I saved and blessèd."*

Such were the words. As in a hideous nightmare had Giséla spoken them, at the bidding of the mouthpiece of the Gods. And now, by the will of the Gods, she must crush out of her heart even the last spark of quivering love for wicked Britric.

In the very memory of his embrace lay sin and danger. Yet it seemed to her in the darkness that his arms encircled her; and his voice, the voice so resonant in war and strong in council, but ever soft to her, whispered, "Belovèd, I forgive thee."

Then tears streamed from her eyes, and her body

trembled, for the pardon of Britric scorched her heart as a flame of fire; and her soul shrank back in terror from a love and magnanimity beyond her comprehending.

If she yet loved Britric, his magical voice would lure her into darkness, lure her to share his punishment, lure her to utter destruction of her soul!

For her soul's sake, in the name of the Most High, she must root up out of her heart this fatal love, a love which would bind her to sorrow, love which would cut her off for ever from hope of peace and joy.

Had not the all-wise Druid vowed to her that the Gods would blast her if she clung to Britric? What mortal woman could challenge the High Gods?

O, cruel Britric to love her still, and by his love endanger her soul!

She rose from her bed and stretched out her white arms, and to the Gods she prayed in her blind terror:

"Let him not love me. Let him forget me! Give me no more love!"

But when she uprooted thus her love of Britric, it seemed as if the life of her soul was extinguished.

What could she ever be without her King and Lover? What was the poor mirror of her empty heart without his image?

With a piteous wailing cry she fell to the ground. And there she sobbed herself to sleep; and knew not whether an hour or a lifetime passed ere she awakened on the morning that was to see the King her husband finally degraded, cursed beyond redemption, driven out into the wilderness,—to starve, to die, and go down to the underworld of darkness.

## CHAPTER XIV

### "IN THE NAME OF THE MOST HIGH GODS"

ALL through that memorable night the north wind shrieked and wailed; but the dawn brought hush and calmness.

It was on a sunlit morning, with blue sky and fleecy clouds overhead, and a gentle breeze from the west, that the King must be brought captive into the midst of his own subjects and pronounced accursèd.

The Druids had kept him fasting since two days agone; and though he was parched with fever from the pain of his wounds, they would give him no drop of water to ease his thirst.

The red hot iron of the tormenter had been applied again—and yet again—in effort to draw forth from Britric an expression of regret for his defiance three days bypast at the Stones of Sacrifice. But not even one word of penitence had passed his lips.

Very thick the thronging of the people. Never before had they seen a King condemned; and much they shuddered at the power of the Druids, who dared dethrone even a leader so victorious, so greatly honored.

Generous to the poorest was King Britric, and magnanimous to all. Yet not one voice might be raised in his defense; for the Druids had sent forth the blasting fiat, *"Whoso defends Britric the Unbeliever, shall with him be cursèd, now and for evermore."*

And though there were many who loved the King, and none who hated him, save only the Druids themselves and the Chief Captain, though scarcely was there a man or a woman in the crowd who had not acclaimed young Britric when he saved their homes from the invader, yet none dare challenge the Druids and defy the terrors of the curse for love of Britric their King and benefactor.

"Yea, he is mad," they whispered; "mad, mad, mad. And the Wise Ones say a mad King must needs be dethroned, lest he bring ruin upon Alba and destroy us all."

. . . . . .

Azure the sky, and golden-bright the sun. Very soft and caressing the breeze, even as if its spirit were a lovely woman, gentle and beguiling.

The people were gathering as on a gala day; and pretty maidens among them jested and laughed. But the faces of the King's Guard were stern and sorrowful, for they loved young Britric well, and had loved his father well; and very bitterly they hated the Druids, who allowed them little honor for their loyal service but said, "By our *prayers* are battles won; and not by the swords of warriors."

At the Stones of Sacrifice waited the Guard, the Captain-in-Chief at their head. And the youngest among them murmured, under his breath, to another venturesome as himself, "What sayest thou? Could we not strike off the King's bonds when he appears; and pierce the Arch-Priest with our javelins, and drag *him* to the altar as a sacrifice, and save our King?"

But the Chief Captain overheard the whispering, and bent his dark brows in a frown, and whispering in reply he said,

"Curb these mutinous thoughts; for the Wise Ones see from afar, and if ye turn traitor ye shall

be changed by potent magic into stones of granite. Our allegiance to Britric is ended; now must we all renounce him, or else for ever lose our souls to demons of the pit."

The youthful warrior turned pale; very horrible would it be to be smitten into stone,—he who was but a three days' bridegroom. Nor could a stone save the King!

So was the bold one frozen into silence. But inwardly he cursed the Druids, cursed the Captain; then he blessed the King,—but trembled lest the Wise Ones might divine the thoughts of his heart.

Preceded by music came the Druids,—music and song.

In robes blue as the sky walked the bards, their harps in their hands, and a hymn to the Gods on their lips. And behind them came thrice thirty novices, young and beardless, clad in white. Very devout they were, with heads bent down, eyes lowered, and hands clasped in prayer. Britric would fain have trained them to be warriors, but they chose rather to serve the Most High Gods in safety.

The crowd fell back to make way for the long procession.

Greater than the novices and bards were yet to come.

Holy the novices and blessèd; thrice blessèd the bards trained to sing as the Gods inspired them. But blessèd thrice and thrice again, the Holiest Ones, the Master Druids, who penetrated the secrets even of the stars and sun and moon.

Ninety and nine were they; and by threes they walked. And last of all, in token of humility, came the Most Sacred One, the great Arch-Druid, in whose wand dwelt powers to lift the pious soul to the high Heavens, or chain the wicked in eternal darkness.

Prone fell the nearest of the crowd as the Arch-Druid passed. But he vouchsafed them never a glance.

Behind him, fettered with chains and bound with thongs of hide, between two spearmen walked Britric, once the King, now King no longer.

Pale and stern his face, and thin and hollow. Gone his crown and his sword; but firmly he walked, though the chains were clanking as he

stepped. Very high and proudly he held his head, higher than on that day when all the people had acclaimed him victor.

A hush fell on the multitude as they gazed on their erstwhile King, discrowned and bound and helpless. On his uncovered arms they could see the marks of red hot irons; and some among the women lifted their voices to deride him; for had he been guiltless (so said the holy Druids) the wounds would have been healed and would have left no scar or sign. So by these very marks they knew him as an infidel, a traitor, a blasphemer of the Gods.

At a sign from the Arch-Druid the long procession halted. And the songs of the bards rang out across the sunlit morning, as Britric the Sacrifice entered the circle of the Sacred Stones. Then the Druids gathered around him. The Most Holy Ones came first; and then the bards. And then came the novices,—brought out to behold how swiftly the retribution of the Gods falls on a blasphemer and blasts him here and for evermore.

The Arch-Priest lifted his wand, and the songs were silenced.

Closer pressed the crowd; but the warriors of the Guard held them back, to keep pure and undefiled by base-born presences the Sacred Circle of the Stones.

By the Sacrificial Altar stood the dark Arch-Druid.

Raised on boulders of stone was this altar; and He of the Potent Wand stood high in the sight of the multitude.

Loud rang his voice; none were there even on the outskirts of the crowd who could not hear it:

"Britric, once the King, thy people are absolved from their allegiance. In the name of the Most High Gods I say and declare that thou, who hast profaned the altar and hast mocked the holy rite of the Sacrifice, art verily accursèd. Never within man's memory has there been a King so bold, so blasphemous as thou."

Then Britric answered; and though his voice was husky from fever and fasting, yet still was his mien commanding:

"Thou wouldst have a sacrifice. Take *me* for sacrifice; and when thy knife releases my soul from out my body, up to the Gods will I go, and to them

will I declare, *'Lo, for my people have I died, even as I lived. Very dearly do I love my people; and of the Most High I beseech a blessing for each one and all.'* "

Then the Arch-Druid's face flushed purple with wrath; and in a voice as of a roaring bull he answered,

"Again thou mockest and blasphemest the Most Holy! Well thou knowest that a sacrifice to the Gods must be clean and undefiled; but thou, O Britric, art unclean, accursèd!"

But Britric's eyes never wavered, nor was his proud head lowered; nor did he seem to heed or hear the angry reviling voice.

Up to the skies he looked. Calm were they, blue, and smiling. So fair and bright the morning that it seemed as if even the elements laughed and mocked at the King's anguish.

Alone was he; no immortal spirit of truth had come to deliver him; no voice of the Unknown God rang forth from out the Heavens to pronounce, *"This is a just man; touch him not!"*

But mayhap the moment was not yet come.

High on the stones before the altar stood the ter-

rible Arch-Druid, and to the watching crowd his form seemed mighty with strength beyond the strength of mortals.

"Britric, King erstwhile," he said, "Britric the Outlaw now,—in the name of the Most High Gods I pronounce thee cursèd henceforth for evermore. To the wilderness shalt thou go; branded with the marks of sin, clad in the garment of infamy. Now thou art cursèd, no man may eat with thee nor drink with thee, nor buy nor sell with thee, nor give thee shelter, nor accept the labor of thy hands."

Stern and defiant the face of the King, and very silent the crowd; and in the eyes of the spearmen of the Guard, save only the Chief Captain, brooded woe and horror; for never within the memory of man had they heard so terrible a sentence.

And the roaring voice of the High Priest came forth as a gust of storm wind:

"Wiped out are thy marriage vows, O Britric. Thy wife is free; for the Gods unite not the flesh of the righteous with the flesh of the blasphemer. Nor mayest thou take to thine arms a woman ever again, save under the penalty that she, even as thou,

must be accursèd! Dead shalt thou be to the world. Trampled in the dust thy name; let no man hereafter dare to pronounce it."

Then at a sign of the potent wand, the spearmen unclasped from the King's wrists and ankles the heavy iron fetters, and cut the thongs holding his arms tight to his sides.

"Unbound are thy limbs," said the Druid, "but bound for ever thy spirit. For even as the Gods gave into my hands their power on earth, so in the underworld do they enchain and bind the soul my voice declares accursèd.

"With the beasts of the forest shalt thou dwell, Britric the Outlaw, with the wolves and the wild cats and the enemies of man. And when thou diest, thy soul shall go down, deep down, into the underworld of darkness. For ever and for ever shalt thou gnash thy teeth among the demons. And the Gods will laugh at thee!"

A moan of horror broke from the crowd. Then their voices rose in a hoarse murmur; for they thought how wicked a tyrant must their King have been in secret, to deserve so dark a sentence even despite his valor and his many acts of mercy!

"Tear off his tunic," said the Arch-Priest to the javelin bearers; and reluctantly they tore and rent it away. Defend him they dared not; but love of him in their hearts they could not entirely crush out.

"Cover him with the black robe," commanded the same pitiless voice.

And two novices came forward and clad Britric in a shapeless garment, black as midnight, coarse and rough so that the poorest hind would have scorned it; and this was the robe which marked him outcast.

Then from the bards came a resounding burst of glad triumphal music; and their voices rose melodiously, chanting a pæon of praise to the High Gods.

And as they chanted, Britric in his black robe of shame stood rigid as a statue hewn in marble. But his eyes still shone, and to the Heavens he looked, thinking to see now, even now, a host of warrior spirits throng with their swords and trumpets to proclaim, "*Lo, this King is innocent.*"

But the Heavens were dumb; and the murmur of the crowd waxed louder and rose to a roar; for the Arch-Priest had lifted his wand, and as if moved by

a spell the crowd, even with one voice and as one man shouted, "Woe to Britric!"

But the men of the Guard stood silent and sad; save only the Chief Captain,—he of the heavy brows and smoldering eyes,—and lo, he laughed aloud.

# PART FOUR

## CHAPTER XV

### "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD"

IT was early morning in the radiant springtime.

Dew-drenched were the delicate wind-flowers and masses of fragrant violets on the hillsides north of the shining waters of Galilee. Very peaceful and rural these green slopes. But down in the city of Capernaum, already the stir and turmoil of traffic had begun. The Damascus road was thronged with travelers from afar: merchants with camel droves and pack-mules, beggars, pilgrims, wanderers; and every now and then a Roman chariot, yoked to horses from the Arab desert, would flash past at breakneck pace; or a Company of Foot soldiers, brisk and tireless, with heads erect and shoulders squared, would march along the dusty highway,—in vigor, discipline, and keen efficiency, the incarnation and the symbol of proud Rome.

On the sun-bathed waters the fishermen were ply-

ing their craft; and on the wharves and in the streets of Tiberias and Magdala on the west, Hippos towards the east, and Bethsaida and Capernaum north of the tranquil inland sea, the hum and buzz of multitudinous life was growing every moment louder and more insistent. So motley the throng swarming along the highways meeting in busy Capernaum, that no attention was attracted to a tall barbarian who towered above the other men, and who in a less multi-colored crowd could scarcely have escaped remark.

Not even among the picked warriors of the renowned Tenth Legion could a finer figure have been seen; and though he wore the humiliating garb distinctive of a slave, his golden-brown hair, very fine and silky, his fair skin, and his deep gray eyes, suggested that a northern land of freedom must have given him birth.

But in the service of Rome there were so many slaves from Gaul and chilly Alba, and from regions even more distant, that none among the crowd of Jews and Gentiles troubled to glance at the mighty-thewed barbarian whose innate nobility of bearing no menial dress could disguise.

On the slopes of Safed, north of Capernaum, stood the house of the gentle recluse Archias, the scholar who in his youth had made songs at the courts of Kings; the sage in whose veins flowed the blood of long-dead heroes who had vanquished the potent Persians at Marathon and in that sea-fight which has for ever hallowed the name of Salamis.

Two score years it was since the soul of Archias had come into a world where the resounding glory of Rome had eclipsed the fame of his ancestral Athens.

Of a conquered and impoverished race, without hope of wealth or power, yet was Archias gifted with a treasure no change nor chance could destroy: the memory of his forebears, whose bright traditions of heroic valor, beauty and graciousness, and white-winged wisdom, fired and inspired him anew each day to train his intellect even as an athlete trains his muscles for the Olympic games.

Very joyous had Archias been in his prime of manhood when he found a wife whose mind and soul were so nearly akin to his own that even as one spirit were he and she.

But seldom in this darkened, cramped existence may a man know Paradise on earth, except in fleeting glimpses; and scarce had Ione revealed to her husband the harmonies of a true and perfect love, when the Gods drew her back into the other world (the world of Eternal Light whence she had descended but for a little while, to grant an ardent lover brief realization of his fairest dreams).

Giving birth to Ione the child, Ione the mother passed by the narrow gates of death into the realm of the Immortals.

And Archias, faithful to her memory, had lived nine years alone with his little daughter, and with three attendants: a Greek who was nurse to Ione, and who cooked the simple meals and swept out the rooms each morning; a Syrian who hewed the wood and carried water, and went down into Capernaum with messages; and an aged slave who tended the fragrant garden.

Very beautiful the garden of Archias, with its wealth of lilies, violets, and golden-eyed narcissus. Dignified the tall dark cypresses and spreading cedars; graceful the almond and pomegranate trees;

and, beyond the garden, very green and luxuriant the undulating slopes, wooded with ilex, bay, and palm, making a pleasant shade on the bright morning.

And joyous and merry the little maiden Ione, who flitted hither and thither, swiftly, softly, singing to herself in a clear melodious voice, untroubled by care or foreboding.

Her life had been even as a dream of sunlit tranquillity and cloudless affection. Compounded of sunshine was her spirit; and fragrant her soul as the violets she wove into a chaplet.

But for whom were her slender fingers weaving the dewy violets into a crown? For Isis, whose statue of white Parian marble gleamed from a circle of sweet bay trees? For Phœbus Apollo, whose beauty recalled the Golden Age when the Gods walked on earth? For Hermes, the messenger of the Gods? For Horus, the Son of Isis?

Nay, for none of these!

To an altar of stone, battered, time-worn, not even graceful of line nor decorated by the sculptor's art, Ione carried her fragrant chaplet. Lovingly and tenderly she offered it, her eyes agleam, her

flower-like face bowed reverently in honor of the Unknown God, to whom this altar had been dedicated by some forgotten worshiper in the distant past.

Ione clasped her hands, and prostrated herself, once, twice, thrice; and then stood looking upwards to the translucent sky.

When would the God descend to earth? How soon? He the Mysterious One whose very name was hidden; He the Deliverer, the Glorious, the Loving and Triumphant, whose face no man had seen?

Ione pondered. Never could she remember a time when her Father had not worshiped the Unknown God; for Archias each morning consecrated his life afresh to the noblest of the Gods, the Redeemer Who was yet to come.

Archias and his father before him, and again their ancestors, one to another handing on the ancient promise, had served in patient faith this God of the Future, the King and Conqueror to be.

From the days when Pythagoras founded his famous school of wisdom, many centuries bypast in Crotona, the tradition of the Hidden God had been

most loyally cherished. And in Archias, the Unknown God had an adorer pure in heart, magnanimous in deed, and gracious in his words.

Out from the marble portico, and across the paven court with its twinkling fountain, came Archias, to share in the devotions he had taught to his child. But before he turned into the grove of cypress leading to the ancient altar, he paused a moment and stood looking downwards to the south-east.

Striding up one of the steep narrow pathways was a tall man in the garments of a slave, a figure which arrested his attention; and he looked at this man again, and yet again.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE BARBARIAN

THE house of Archias, built of stone and of colored marble from the ruins of an ancient palace, stood out against the wooded background of plane, palm and cypress.

The slave who, with long swift strides had mounted the hillside, opened the gate and entered the bright garden.

He paused where two paths diverged; for though the path facing him was plainly the way up to the house, a white-robed child was looking towards him from a cypress avenue.

She ran forward with a welcoming gesture. Though the stranger's dress seemed to proclaim him a slave, Ione gazed up at him with wonder, for she thought him almost as noble looking as the statue of Apollo. So stately his figure, so proud his face, so keen his glance, that his garment of

slavery appeared to her but as the humble disguise in which a God might veil his greatness if he visited the earth to bring a blessing to the faithful.

She spoke to him in Greek; but he answered her in Aramaic, his deep, gentle voice forming the words so slowly that she saw the tongue was foreign to him:

"The house of Archias, the Greek Philosopher? A letter for him from his kinsman the Centurion Claudius Andronicus."

Scarcely would Apollo be a letter carrier, or speak in Aramaic, thought Ione; but she was puzzled by the slave's appearance and his manner.

Very gently he looked down upon her from his height; but though his words were hesitating, and he touched his forehead with the scroll he carried, saluting after the fashion of a slave, still Ione could not reconcile his dress with his demeanor.

"I will lead thee to Archias," she answered, speaking this time in Aramaic as the slave had spoken; "and then will I give thee fruit and wine; and after thou art refreshed and rested I will show thee our ancient altar to the Unknown God."

The barbarian's face lighted up with an expres-

sion in which amazement, reverence, joy, were mingled.

"The Unknown God!" he exclaimed, and his voice trembled.

"Save only my father and myself and our small household," said Ione, "there are none I know who love Him."

"I also," said the barbarian; "I alone of all my people love Him."

Ione's beautiful tranquil eyes gazed up at the stranger's face with trusting admiration;

"Our God has sent thee here," she murmured, awestruck.

But she spoke these whispered words in Greek, and the slave knew not what she was saying.

# CHAPTER XVII

## SOLDIER AND PHILOSOPHER

*"Claudius Andronicus*
*to his kinsman Archias the Philosopher*
*Salutation and Greeting.*

"Recallest thou thy sojourn in Rome many years past, and how thou wert ever welcome at the house of Caius Andronicus, since called back to the Gods?

"Dost thou remember a boy, ten years of age, who spoke seldom but who listened much, to whom thou didst relate the way thine ancestors shattered the Persian fleet in the bay of Salamis?

"He who was that boy would hearken to thee again. From Rome he has arrived in Capernaum with the Second Cohort of the Thirteenth Legion.

"Little does he find to please him in this city of self-righteous priests, complacent pharisees, and greedy traders. Much would it gladden him to have speech of thee.

"In Egypt he has served, and in Crete, in Cyprus, in the Libyan desert, and in Thrace and Macedonia. Yet is he still a Centurion at nine-and-twenty, though at that age his grandsire led the Fourteenth Legion.

"To thee Claudius will come at noon on the tenth day from this, and stay till close on sunset, if thou wilt grant him welcome.

"Wisdom and learning will he seek of thee, remembering thee of old as one who embodied and maintained the high traditions of a more noble age than ours."

Such was the letter delivered into the hands of Archias by the barbarian slave.

When the Roman Imperial officer arrived at the house of the Greek kinsman he had not seen for nineteen years, he came alone; no slaves to precede or attend him. And he stabled his own horse, and gave it food and water, ere he accompanied his host into the cool north room whence Archias looked out each day on the snows of lofty Mount Hermon.

Archias, whose hair was prematurely gray, and whose recluse's life tended to link him rather with

the ancient past than with the hustling present, was obviously older than his Roman cousin. But though the Centurion showed youth and strength in his figure, his face was worn and thin.

His features, bronzed under Egyptian suns, were clear-cut, stern and haughty; but very urbane and courteous was his manner; and in this courtesy was something direct, decisive, powerful, which bespoke him swift of initiative, forceful in action, and steadfast in resolve.

The scholar, fragile and delicate, looked at the soldier with an expression which was almost wistful.

"In the world of ideas have I lived, alone with my thoughts and my dreams these many years," he said, "but thou in the world of men."

"Time was," replied the Centurion in his clear vigorous voice, "Time was when the world of thought and the world of action were one and the same. Since they are separated, noble ideas grow rarer, and action loses dignity and inspiration; for we live in the age of gold, which, alas, is far other than the Golden Age!"

Archias had not looked to find in his kinsman

any disgust against an age which most Roman officers were very well content to take just as they found it.

"Dreamest thou of the Golden Age? But for ever has it vanished! Vainly we yearn to call it back. Now tell me, provincial that I am, how goes the world? Is Rome magnificent and regal as in my youth?"

"The Seven Hills stand where they did," said Claudius; "and the Temple of Venus is thronged with worshipers as of yore. At first glance Rome to-day seems even the same immortal glorious city as of ten or twenty years agone. But either I grow less easy to please, or there are changes by no means for the better. Extremes of poverty and of luxury, of lawlessness and tyranny, are sharply conspicuous. The idle mob, those who are unemployed, and who reject employment, cumber the streets by day and lurk in the porticoes by night, using the cloak of darkness as a cover for vile crimes. The Tribune who would rise to power must cajole, befool, and flatter this blinded multitude, and buy popularity at the cost of truth and manhood. Not merit nor honesty prevail to-day; but craft and

subtlety. And if a soldier presumes to try and bring to Cæsar's notice outrages against our Roman justice, then first must he court the minions of Cæsar, mimes and buffoons and triflers, ere he be permitted to break in on the imperial seclusion. Then, like as not, Tiberius dismisses the vital question with a vague misleading promise, and falls to talking of the latest gladiatorial show."

The Centurion did not raise his voice, nor emphasize his words; yet beneath his surface calmness was an inner fire of steady indignation and impersonal disgust.

"Rome is infested," he said, "with hordes of new rich men, in whose society it has become the fashion to seek relaxation; not for wit or talent or urbanity, of which they can boast little, but for their sumptuous repasts, and for the multiplicity of wines they press on needy patricians whose debts wax heavy and whose tastes are epicurean."

Archias sighed; "A mercenary age; but are not all ages mercenary?"

"I fear," said Claudius, "that even in the heroic era, even in the sternest days of Roman simplicity and valor, the noblest men were the most lonely.

And in thy beautiful Athens, too often poverty, exile, base ingratitude, betrayal, and a tragic death, were the rewards of the few who strove to elevate and purify the many."

Archias was silent; he had looked to the robust Imperial officer to bring with him an atmosphere of vigorous content; not this stern melancholy.

"The thirst for gold," mused Claudius, "is old as civilization. In thine ancestral Athens, and in Corinth, even in ancient Egypt, and in Persia at its proudest, there were men who bartered their very souls to be a little richer than their kind. But such creatures multiply in a degenerate age; and it appears to me that conquering Rome has learnt to copy all the vices of the conquered. I am no Stoic; little do I see to charm me in the story of Diogenes snarling in his tub, mistaking churlish misanthropy and dirty linen for the marks of independence and sublime philosophy. Nor do the Spartans of the past, save in their martial hardihood, rank in my mind among the most inspiring examples. Therefore thou needest not accuse me of a Spartan narrowness, if I tell thee it revolts me to see the spirit

of Phœnician traders spreading subtly, imperceptibly, throughout the Empire."

Archias made no comment, but his expression of sympathy drew the Centurion on.

"Trade in honor, trade in woman's flesh, old as the world this merchandise! And in vain I chafe at seeing it wax daily more flagrant. Far and wide the Phœnicians have carried their gross corruption. If rumor wrongs them not, the cult of their vile gods has crept even so far as distant Britain and foggy Western Alba."

"I knew not thou hadst served in Alba or in cloudy Britain," said Archias.

"Nor have I," answered the Roman; "and, the barbarian slave I bought will tell me nothing as to the customs of his race and country."

Archias was puzzled; patience towards recalcitrant slaves was not a Roman virtue.

"It seems," he said, "that thou holdest not with the common custom among thy countrymen that if a slave withhold desired information it may be wrung from him by torture?"

Claudius answered swiftly,

"In the army I am a strict disciplinarian, as any man in authority must be to-day, when so many recruits are drawn from the dregs of the populace in whose eyes humanity wears semblance of fear, and generosity seems weakness. Much care and labor it needs to transmute the base alloy into the iron of an efficient, loyal, trusty soldier. But even with my least promising recruits I prevail by asking of them nothing that I would not do myself,—rather than by arrogance and harsh brutality which savor more of old Assyrian fury than of Roman vigor. As to my slaves, very few can I afford. Those few I treat as men, not beasts. I would sell a slave if he offended; but never would I cause him to be tortured."

The Centurion rose and began pacing up and down the room. "Assyria, Babylonia, and Medo-Persia,—how did they fall? By their vices and their gross unmanly cruelties, which rotted them even when they seemed invulnerable. And shall we not take warning?"

The Centurion paused a moment, as if the expression of his thoughts was difficult. Then he said,

"Throughout my twelve years' foreign service, I have striven to observe and study the fashions and beliefs of all the various races with which I came in contact. From the present I have evolved my view of the past, and in the past sought the key to the future. But men's inner selves I judge less by their professed beliefs and outward rank than by their actions. The noble character is noble even in chains; the base are base still after the caprice of Fortune or the mysterious working of Destiny has enthroned them in seeming majesty and triumph."

Claudius crossed to the north window whence he could look up towards Mount Hermon.

"There," he said, "until Rome intervened, the worshipers of Baal and Astoreth and Moloch used to stain the snows with the blood of children and young virgins, boys and maidens, offered to the implacable and greedy gods they made in their own image."

Archias sighed; "A noble spirit, descending from the Heavens down to this chaotic earth, must needs awaken jealousy and hatred in base narrow souls. Thus the purest have been ever the most ill-fated.

The murder of Osiris in the Egyptian legend, the death of Socrates in actual fact, these are significant of the fate which in every age awaits him who unmasks the loathsomeness of evil. Men like to be deceived; they like to give their vilest impulses high-sounding names; and woe to him who offers them truth when they ask flattery! That each man must win his own salvation by a clean courageous life, by acts of justice and mercy, and by strenuous aspiration and achievement, is a stern demand. Only the warrior spirits will assent to it. The base and coward souls would buy the favor of their Deities by sacrificing the weak and helpless,—deeming the Deity can be vicariously served and thus propitiated."

Claudius paced up and down the room, his footsteps clanking on the mosaic pavement.

"I have dreamt of my own God," he said, "One whom I find not in any Temple nor adored of any priest. In Him are blended all the highest attributes of heroic man, justice, truth, immutable valor; vigor and tenderness; the power to lead and to inspire, so gallantly, so compellingly, that even as soldiers willingly give their lives to win a victory

for the leader who has shared their hardships, so might the votaries of this God think death and sacrifice of self but a small price to pay for the honor and happiness of serving One who can never err, One whose love is eternal."

Archias brightened at these words.

"Knowest thou," he said, "that many hundred years agone, Pythagoras in his school at Crotona taught to his initiates the need of preparation even for such a God as thou describest; One who is yet to come, and in whom the divinity of the unchanging heavens and the highest nobility of manhood's aspiration is to meet, and walk the world in a mortal form."

Claudius pondered. "The Jews," he said, "cherish some prophecy of a Messiah who is to redeem their race from servitude and then to rule the world. But Mars and Apollo help us, if we are to be ground down under the heel of the Hebrew priests and levites! Never was any race more narrow, more exclusive, more coldly arrogant. Rome stands for unity, for universitality, as well as nationality; but the Jews are provincial to the marrow of their bones. Even if a Messiah comes from the skies to raise

them, unless he will slavishly adapt his every utterance to suit the prejudices of their priesthood, and conciliate their jealous tempers, they will shut their ears against him. Like as not, they would mock at him or stone him."

"I have a Syrian among my servants," said Archias, "and each time I send him down into the city, he returns with stories of one Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, whom he hears speaking to the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee, relating many things in parables, and foretelling, for the righteous, doom then triumph, persecution and an ultimate victory. And my servant has heard the crowd muttering that the High Priest hates this Jesus and would have him silenced."

"Not readily can I believe good can come out of Nazareth," said the Centurion; "but I will inquire concerning this man Jesus. 'Foretelling doom,' thou sayest? Preaches he against our Empire?"

"Nay," said Archias. "When the seditious strove to find a pretext for rebellion by asking why should they, the Children of Jehovah, pay tribute to the foreign Cæsar, this Jesus held up a denarius

and said *'Whose superscription see ye on this coin?'*; and the crowd said *'Cæsar's.'* Then he answered, *'Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's; and to God the things that are God's.'* Very grievously were those malcontents offended who had grumbled at the taxes; and yet more angered the Scribes and Pharisees who hoped to wreck the man by accusing him of treason against Cæsar."

"Of what rank is this Jesus?" asked the Centurion.

"No rank or wealth is his. Very poor and obscure his parents; but my Syrian servant declares them to be of the blood of the long-vanished dynasty of David, the heroic shepherd King, who slew the giant Goliath."

"Ah," exclaimed the Centurion, "a fighting ancestry, and not a priestly! Verily I shall inquire concerning this bold Nazarene."

"Nay, he is no warrior," replied Archias. "He is a Rabbi, some say an Essene. But I hear, from those who listen to him speaking, that he has such gentle dignity and courtesy of manner as might grace a new Pythagoras. And, even as Pythagoras, they say he preaches the cult of a Supreme God,—

Father and King of all mankind, one whose love extends to every race and every people."

Claudius smiled ironically. "Then," he said, "this Jesus will not please the Jews."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

THEN followed a long pause, broken only by the plashing of a fountain in the courtyard, and by the gentle sighing of the south wind in the cypress trees.

It was that silence in which two friends who trust each other can each follow the train of his own thoughts without fear lest the other deem him churlish or unsocial.

Abruptly Claudius broke the silence: "Didst thou remark a tall barbarian slave I sent up with my letter? He is honest as the daylight. In countless ways have I tested him, and not yet has he failed me."

"In what campaign didst thou capture him?" asked the Greek.

"I bought him in Rome," said Claudius; "I had not thought to add to the number of my slaves; but, as I crossed the market, on my way to the Necropo-

lis, I noticed him. Had he been a freeman, I should at once have endeavored to enlist him. As it was, I stopped and looked at him. He stood on the usual wooden platform, and had the inevitable card tied round his neck, with a statement, probably fictitious, of where the dealer bought him, and how much he cost, and what price he must fetch that day. A Phœnician trader and a hook-nosed Jew were bargaining against each other for him, and the Jew was trying to get the price reduced because of some scars defacing the fellow's arms and breast and shoulders. The dealer, a fat greasy brute, was crying up the strength and value of this hand-some piece of merchandise; and through all the clamor the barbarian stood immovable as a statue, but with such an expression of scorn in his eyes that my heart warmed to him."

If Archias was mildly surprised to hear a Roman officer speak of a slave thus sympathetically, he was too well-bred to show his astonishment.

"I know little of the arts," resumed Claudius, "but were I the Mæcenas to a rising sculptor, and were I ordering a statue of Vercingetorix as prisoner to Cæsar, I could wish my artist no better model

than this stately barbarian, who stood regarding the hucksters as if they were but buzzing insects. Even so must Vercingetorix have scorned the Roman rabble, when they mocked at him as he walked in chains behind the chariot of Cæsar."

"I well recall," said Archias, "how thy grandsire, Andronicus, related to me his own part in the contest of Cæsar against that Gaul who held the armies of Rome at bay so long, and who in strategy and tactics, no less than in valor and iron resolution, showed genius second only to the genius of mightiest Julius."

"Yea," said Claudius, "though greatly my grandsire rejoiced in the ultimate and hard-won victory of our armies, yet he pitied the gallant barbarian Prince, who, after so prolonged and honorable a resistance, was doomed to die obscurely in a Roman dungeon, as soon as the crowd was glutted with the spectacle of seeing him walk through the streets in chains at the head of all the other captives."

"And so thou didst purchase this slave because he reminded thee of Vercingetorix, the stubborn foe of Rome!" Archias exclaimed.

"The Jew retreated from the contest," said

Claudius, "and the dealer was just about to close with the Phœnician's offer, when I entered into competition with this Baal-worshiper. I rarely forget a face, and I saw in this Phœnician one whose name is notorious in Alexandria, where he drives, both with Western and Eastern customers, a thriving trade in women; and kidnaps the women to save the expense of paying for them. The trade is universal; but the Phœnicians conduct it in a manner against which I have deep-rooted prejudices. So rather than let the barbarian fall into the hands of this vile creature,—to be doorkeeper of a disgusting den of thieves and harlots,—I bought him myself, though I could ill-afford the price. The Imperial officer must pay at higher rates than a Phœnician tradesman!"

Archias was interested. "Of what race is this slave?"

"A Gaul, the dealer said; but by his appearance he might more probably be a Western Celt."

"Do the Western Celts worship an Unknown God?" asked Archias.

"Never that I have heard."

"Strange," mused the Greek; "for this barbarian

bent his head in reverence before an altar here in my garden, an ancient altar dedicated to the Unknown God."

The Centurion's eyes brightened. "Perchance that Unknown God and the God of my dreams are one," he said. "Would that this God might hasten the revelation of His light to the world of darkness!"

"Every morning when I waken," said Archias, "I pray for the final victory of pure love and mercy over hatred and confusion. And when I say 'love,' I think not of the worship of Venus-Aphrodite, born of the foam of the sea, inconstant as the waves and tempests, beautiful with a beauty which deceives, enslaves, and tortures. I pray to the True Eros,—who gives wings to the mind and wafts the soul upwards to the Heavens.

"Very far apart this dream of everlasting love,—immortal, deathless,—and the cruel love inspired by pitiless Aphrodite, who destroys far more than she creates. Yet both are covered by the word religion."

"Oh, *words!*" said Claudius. "Since language was invented more often have words been used to deceive than to enlighten."

Not from disappointed ambition was Claudius embittered—though his honesty had stood in the way of his prosperity,—not from thirst for fame, nor envy of the wealth of others had he grown cynical; but he was weighed down with that mysterious deep-seated sorrow which feels the evils of the world as if responsible for them,—that keen impersonal capacity for entering in thought into the sins and follies of man, even while dwelling lonely and aloof.

Craving a God to love and serve,—yet too keen-sighted, too robust of intellect not to remark the flaws, and worse than flaws in every official form of worship,—Claudius was seeking, searching, waiting; and he had almost begun to lose his hope of finding.

Archias stretched out a slender hand and laid it on the Roman's arm.

"Thou art sad," he said. "Is there aught by which old friendship can aid or cheer thee?"

Claudius looked at him very gratefully. Archias had been the admiration of his boyhood; and the Centurion was one whose affections grow

only the deeper in absence, the stronger beneath the relentless test of time.

"Nay," he said, "dear kinsman, not for myself I grieve, save that I am part of the vast whole; and I fear the whole may be infected with the poison of a disease which killed the ancient Empires and broke up the Greek Republics. When I read of the colossal power of Assyria, when I remind myself of the magnificence of Babylonia, when I reflect how Egypt's monarchy and priesthood maintained unbroken sway for thousands of years, only to fall at last a victim to Cambyses, my heart sinks with a dread that even as these superb powers decayed from within, and then crashed down beneath the swords of younger and less luxurious races, so also must Rome fall. But I pray I may not live to see it."

"At first," said the Greek, "the downward way slopes so gently and so imperceptibly that men tread it without even dreaming of any precipice ahead. But this catastrophe thou dreadest is surely very far distant!

'Around the future Jove has cast
A veil like night; he gives us power

To see the present and the past,
But kindly hides the future hour,—
And smiles when men with daring eye
Would pierce that dread futurity.'"

The Centurion recognized the quotation. "Ah," he said, "but Horace could more safely be philosophical than I can, in that he lived further away from the day of reckoning."

"Thou dost think and question too much," said the Greek. "Heroic but vain is it to strive to carry the weight of a future thou canst dread and yet art powerless to avert. Excessive brooding will eat away the springs of action. For me, to peer into the future may be safe, for I am a philosopher without disciples, a poet who no longer craves for readers. No man depends on me, nor woman neither, excepting only my little child Ione, who lives among her flowers, and is herself a flower from the Paradise of faithful love and undying memory. But for thee, Claudius, wiser will it be not to probe deeply into the secrets of the past and future; far wiser not to try and solve the riddle of the why and wherefore of existence. For that way lies deep sorrow."

Claudius felt a sense of disappointment in the man he used to think so wise and learned; and yet the disappointment seemed unreasonable. He smiled kindly, patiently, and walked across to the window once more, and looked out at the distant snow-capped mountain towering high above the vine-clad hillsides and the flowering valleys.

Pleasant the valleys and smiling. Very lonely, chill and steep the mountain. But Claudius more than suspected that in the world of thought and spirit the aspirant must climb the mountain before he may presume to teach the inmates of the valley.

"My kinsman," said Archias, "wilt thou not greet thy cousin, my daughter Ione?"

The Centurion turned swiftly.

In the archway leading from the inner court stood the most lovely child he had ever seen,—so lovely that the light of another world seemed shining through her fearless eyes.

For a moment he paid her the homage of silence. He was thinking that there must be somewhere in the universe a God of perfect harmony; and the child Ione, in her exquisite unconscious beauty, seemed as a Messenger from the Unknown God.

# PART FIVE

## CHAPTER XIX

### ANGUISH

WHEN Britric's sad eyes gazed towards the mountains of Bashan, Moab, and Edom, glowing pink and orange, purple and deep red beneath the cloudless sky, or when he walked by the side of the swift-flowing Jordan and listened to the choir of birds which sang among the graceful flowering trees fringing its banks, his heart pined and yearned for the wind-swept moors and rugged hills of his own country. The shining waters of the Dead Sea, reflecting as in a mirror of steel the mountains on either side, gave him no sense of comfort or upliftment. He longed the more for a glimpse of a winter sunset over the seas of Western Alba.

The brilliant golden sunshine, the luxuriant mass of exquisite flowers, the springs and streams and fountains, all in themselves so beautiful, seemed but to mock his desolation.

Cloudy skies and lonely moors, and the scent of

heather after rain, haunted his memory; and he wearied of the unchanging sunlight.

The motley crowds, Syrians, Egyptians, Greeks and Parthians, warrior Persians, mighty-thewed Ethiopians, Arabs from the desert, and Jewish women carrying water-jars,—all these, in ever-changing phantasmagoria of color, confused and fatigued him.

In the service of the Centurion Claudius, who drew him a rough map of the country for his guidance, he went on many journeys through Samaria and Judea, carrying important letters; and gradually he learnt enough of the Aramaic language to facilitate his intercourse whether with men of the towns or from the desert. But from all, excepting only the Centurion, and the Grecian sage, and the beautiful child Ione, he was separated by an impassable gulf; and even towards these three he felt very ill at ease, for what was he in their eyes but a slave?

His sorrows seemed as a prison wall, shutting him into everlasting solitude,—a solitude peopled with memories of anguish, unrelieved by any glimmer of hope.

Each day, while occupied in the labors of a slave, inwardly he was living the past over and over again. Sleep brought him too brief oblivion; and he woke every morning with a sinking at his heart, and with the picture before him of Giséla turning her face away.

When Giséla failed him he had thought he drank to the dregs the poisoned cup. But no sooner had he drained the bitter cup than it seemed magically to fill again; for the anguish he had suffered in the dungeon had been deepened and intensified when he confronted the multitude and heard the cries of execration from his people, who erstwhile had praised him.

If Giséla had been constant,—though he must never see her again,—if she had vowed to remember him in love, not even the treachery of the Arch-Druid and the fickleness of all his people could have broken his fiery heart. But Giséla's soft white hand had inflicted a wound which pierced his very spirit. Had she been brave and faithful, he could have felt the hidden presence of the God of Love and Mercy even in his darkest hour; and, with that presence to sustain him, not all the torture evil

minds could invent and cruel hands inflict would have brought utter darkness to his soul.

But the devastating agony of being branded outcast and forsaken, shamed in the eyes of all his subjects, cursed in the name of the High Gods, had come so swiftly after Giséla's abject miserable desertion, that the grief and loneliness of Britric seemed to transcend the power of human brain and spirit to endure and not go reeling into madness. Yet he had still endured, though his God and his Belovèd both had failed him.

As in a nightmare he had wandered away into the forest, knowing that now he had become more vile in the eyes of his own subjects than even the most savage beasts.

While the roar of the crowd was booming in his ears, and the words of the curse pierced his soul like poisoned arrows, he had been conscious of no physical weakness. His blood burned in his veins like fire; the pain of his undressed wounds stabbed him into yet keener consciousness.

No merciful faintness laid its gentle touch on his brain to blunt the edge of his sufferings. The very strength of his body, the unquenchable vitality of

his soul, had become new instruments of torture.

The anguish of his spirit overflowed from his heart into every fiber of his being, until he marvelled how it was possible to carry in a human frame such an immeasurable grief,—grief which seemed to rise up out of an abyss of age-long darkness.

After that terrible morning at the Stones of Sacrifice, calm and storm, sunlight and starlight, dawn and sunset, all had become the same to Britric. No glimmer of hope could reach the pit of darkness where his spirit was enchained.

Nothing was left to him, save courage; that courage which not even despair itself can utterly quench.

Though there was none to see him in the wilderness, Britric held his head high; nor did he utter a groan or lamentation. In the silence of midnight, when sleep forsook him and the gnawing pains of slow starvation tore at his vitals, he set his teeth and endured, forbearing to execrate his enemies. Being cursed so heavily, the very thought of cursing others nauseated him. So entirely did he loathe the tyranny of the Druids, so blasted was he by their hatred, that he clung more resolutely to the

thought how greatly he had loved, even although his love had been so ill-requited.

As the days and nights wore on, and Britric could get no food but roots and leaves, his ravenous hunger made increasing inroads on his bodily strength, till at last the hand of death seemed hovering over his head in readiness to strike.

Death, if the Druids' words were true, would mean for him no release from pain and sorrow, but rather the beginning of tortures worse than any yet inflicted.

But Britric in his innermost heart, doubted the power of the Druids to bind him all through Eternity. Might not Death come as a messenger from the Divine Ones, to deliver him from the cruelty of arrogant and pitiless mortals?

Unconquerable is the warrior spirit! Rend it, mock it, torture it, even pronounce it burnt to ashes, dead for ever, yet out of the ashes of doom the valiant one arises reborn like the phœnix. But the fiery agonies of the rebirth of valor resemble so closely the pangs of death, that Britric thought his final hour was approaching. He dragged his hun-

ger-wasted limbs over an undulating stretch of moor, whence he could gaze out to the sea. There would he die; there, within sound of the familiar waves and waters, might the tempest in his heart be stilled. For the last time he would watch the setting of the sun; and as its glowing ball of fire sank beneath the far horizon, his own tormented life would sink and vanish.

But to walk across the moor seemed an achievement almost beyond his failing strength. His limbs faltered, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth; and though he could feel the breath of the sea on his face, his eyes were so dimmed and clouded that as he looked over to the west to watch the sunset, he could see nothing but a veil of thick impenetrable blackness.

Through the blackness came voices in a foreign tongue; many voices; and one decisive, masterful, sounding out above the others.

Instinctively Britric's right hand went to where his sword should have been; but his fingers touched only the coarse black robe, the symbol of his degradation. Nevermore might the outcast wield a sword or battle-ax.

In his left hand he held a branch he had broken from an oak tree; and very wearily he wondered whether with this he could make semblance of resistance. To die fighting, instead of inch by inch of horrible starvation, die in action, even if he had only an oaken staff against a score of foemen, this would be death for a man, and not the death of a beast.

The veil of darkness moved, wavered, and paled to gray; but did not lift; and Britric listened, and strove to discern whether the strange tongue he heard was that of pirates from Ultonia or more distant Gaul, or possibly even from far Phœnicia.

Blindly but resolutely he staggered forward towards the sound of the voices. But before he could reach them, he stumbled over a fallen tree, and crashed down like an oak which the storm breaks in fury because the monarch of the forest will not bend.

An icy blackness swallowed him, and he thought the end had come.

But the moment when a man says to himself, "*This is the end*," may mark the end of one stage

of his testing and the beginning of another fiery ordeal.

Very long and rough and uphill is the way of the warrior soul, and many a defeat must he endure before his final victory.

When Britric awakened, it was not into the life after death, but into a new captivity on earth.

Carried away by slave-raiders, as human cargo destined to be sold in the market-place of Rome, he felt more desolate, more helpless, more forsaken of Gods and men, than even when he had wandered starving on the shores of his own kingdom.

Yet his Roman captors were less cruel than the Druids. They brought him wine to slake his thirst; they gave him food, and they put unguents and linen bandages on the wounds his pious tormentors left uncovered. These good offices the slave-dealers performed, not out of gentleness or in compassion, but because a higher price would be procurable for a handsome strong barbarian than for one whose strength and beauty had been broken by ill-treatment.

Stifled and nauseated in the hold of their ship,

there remained to Britric only one satisfaction,—that these traders did not know whom they had chanced to capture. Never should it pass his lips that he had been a King and leader of men.

Many a Monarch proud Rome had dragged at the chariot-wheels of her triumphant Generals; many a nobly-born warrior of Gaul had been enslaved to Cæsar; but never in Britric should Rome be aware of degrading one who had been King of Western Alba!

To this resolution, made in the first moment of returning consciousness, Britric adhered even after the Centurion Claudius had bought him in the market, and had asked his lineage and country.

The wounds of his body healed rapidly; but the wounds of his spirit opened anew each day; and the more he regained his physical strength, the more sharp the torment of his imprisoned soul, the more flaming his inward rebellion against Fate, the more ravenous his craving for love, action, honor, and all the human joys now and henceforth for ever denied to him.

The hunger for love was the most devastating of

all. He loved Giséla when she worshiped him as her deliverer; he loved her even when she turned her face away. But her shrinking from him, as if he had become unclean and loathsome, was so terrible a consequence of the vile torments wreaked by the cruel Druids on his body, that the memory of it grew every day more bitter.

Giséla had abhorred the ugliness of his wounds, but paused not to think how he had gained those wounds by striving to rescue helpless victims whom no other man had dared to champion.

Had she truly loved him, then in the hour of his anguish her love must have shone out unclouded, even as his for her.

Alas, no star was Giséla; no gift from the Immortals! As a flickering torch was her love, giving light while sheltered from the storm-winds, but in the first harsh blast of adversity so quickly quenched in darkness that eternal night seemed to engulf the soul of Britric.

Never could he forget her. The love he gave, he gave without conditions; nor could he recall it and take back his word, although what once had been his joy was now his ceaseless sorrow.

Through life into death, and beyond the gates of death into the other world, he must carry in his spirit the grief of loving poor Giséla.

And, alas! his love and his forgiveness had no magic to release her from the men at whose command she had withheld from him even one word of greeting and farewell. She had abandoned him because the others were the stronger. Yet why should she deem that those who tortured Britric would be pitiful to her? Safe from the sacrificial knife she must be, for the offering to the Gods must be a virgin. But there were ways of sacrifice less swift than pouring out the heart's blood on the altar.

Back into Britric's memory came Giséla's quivering terror of the Captain-in-Chief. And now that Britric was gone, there was no barrier, no shield, between her and the man she dreaded.

Better had she shared the curse. Better to wander forth into the wilderness, better to starve and die the death of an outlaw, than to live enslaved to the Chief Captain.

Britric pictured her snared like a bird in a net, consumed by the cruel lust of one who rated a woman lower than a hound.

In dreams Britric could hear Giséla sobbing; and in his waking hours she haunted him.

If the Chief Captain wearied of her,—and never yet had he been faithful to a woman,—who in all the land would give her refuge?

It seemed to Britric that her cry of despair reached him silently from the ends of the earth. And though his outward self-control remained unbroken, and his bodily strength did not give way, his inward spirit was as a furnace burning and seething.

In the streets he could not pass a miserable degraded woman, nor could he hear a woman slave chidden or punished, without that woman seeming to look at him with the terrified eyes of Giséla in the dungeon.

Nor could he forget the seven maidens he had striven to rescue from the sacrificial knife; victims so little cognizant of mercy that they shivered in fear of him even when he severed their bonds!

In vain he had sought to avert the doom of these the chosen victims; for the Druids ruthlessly enforced the sacrifice as soon as his protesting voice was silenced. And no God of Love and Mercy

interposed to blast the tyrants and to save the outraged maidens.

Very bitter it seemed to Britric that by his compassion for these maidens he lost not only his crown but the woman who was his dear and only love.

He had so completely trusted Giséla that even now he strove to justify this trust. Surely her turning away was rather the blasting spell of the Arch-Druid than her own deliberate choice?

Yet not all the Druids in the world could have persuaded *him* to turn away from *her!*

Scarcely can a true and constant lover understand inconstancy. Easier could Britric see the causes for the jealousy and hate of the Arch-Druid, than he could comprehend how the ecstatic sweetness of Giséla's passion could be changed to chill repugnance.

A voice in his heart seemed to whisper that if it was sheer terror that had mastered her then, and driven all love out of her soul, terror still darker gripped her now.

That she lived and suffered he doubted not. Were she dead and at peace, her shuddering misery

would not be reaching him across space in soundless waves.

His agonized longing to help and save her tore at his heart and spirit. To the Unknown God he prayed; but the Gods were blind; the Gods were deaf; the Unknown God must be a dream!

Yet Britric knew that if Fate put him back at the parting of the ways, what he had done before, this would he do again.

No matter how terrible the cost, even if there should be no Loving God, Britric could not repent his proud defiance of the Druids. Never would the son of his Mother have bought safety at the cost of murdering poor helpless women, in the shedding of whose blood the Gods were thought to delight. If the Gods were verily so lustful, so cowardly, as to demand the sacrifice of innocent young maidens, well had Britric refused their hideous peace! Better this exile, ruin, and captivity, better disgrace in the eyes of men, and relentless anger from the Gods, better even an eternal curse, than to have sold his manhood to the Gods of the Arch-Druid!

As he stood on the banks of the Dead Sea, from

the depths of his spirit he prayed to the Unknown One:

"God Eternal and All-seeing, if any God there be; God of Justice, God of Valor, God of Pity, deliver my wretched people, save and rescue my Belovèd! With *me* do what Thou wilt; for though my heart be broken, yet shall my soul remain unshaken. From the deeps I cry to thee, and from the darkness! Save my people!"

The sunlight sparkled gaily on the waters; the song-birds chirruped; the cloudless skies seemed only to scorn his sorrow.

And Britric sighed. It seemed as if there were no God of Mercy. Or if there might be such a God, He—even as Giséla—turned his face away.

## CHAPTER XX

### MASTER AND SLAVE

THE morning after Claudius returned from his visit to the Greek philosopher, he sent for the barbarian.

"Go out into the town," he said, "and mingle with the people; and listen and hear what they say of one Jesus from Nazareth, whose preachings of late are making no little stir. And if thou findest this man, say to him 'Claudius, a Centurion in the Second Cohort, Thirteenth Legion, asks thee to speak with him at his house.' Then bring him hither; and escort him courteously."

At nightfall Britric returned alone; "Jesus of Nazareth," he said, "is not in Capernaum; men say he has gone into Judea. Many speak well of him; some deride him; and the Jew priests say *'He hath a devil!'* "

"Didst thou learn what manner of man he is?"

"I asked 'how may I know him if I see him?' He is tall and comely, the people say; well made and straight; his eyes searching; quick to reprove the arrogant, but prompt to melt in tenderness towards the suffering and feeble. Very courteous in speech, though grave. Some have seen him smile; a few have seen him weep; but none have ever seen him laugh. His following are fishermen and peasants."

Many weeks passed, but the Nazarene did not return to Galilee.

The sun blazed more fiercely each day; the dust in the roads swirled in stifling clouds; and the burning breath of the sirocco came blowing afar from the desert, seeming to gather strength as it came.

Then were three of the slaves in the Centurion's household smitten with an epidemic fever. But the barbarian went about his work with haughty patience and unflagging energy, little aware that his resolute stern eyes and his unconscious dignity had won him the Centurion's respect, and had singled him out as of a different order of creation from the other slaves. Some of his fellow servants hated

him for his superiority; others feared him; just one admired him.

By day he toiled incessantly, nor looked for any repose even in the scorching hour of noon. By night he watched over the fever-stricken slaves; and brought them pure water to moisten their parched lips; and in Aramaic—and sometimes in his Northern tongue they understood not,—he murmured words of pity.

Of his own health he seemed careless; and so unwearying was he that his master, ever observant, suspected him to be goaded day and night by an unsleeping sorrow.

The happy can rest, and the lazy, and the utterly exhausted; the earthy soul can repose in stupor of indolence; the watery soul may be lulled like the waves from tossing agitation to a brief delusive calm; the airy soul can float into dream-regions of mystical peace. But the fiery soul, initiated into sorrow, fights inwardly and suffers ceaselessly,—defies despair, and stands up boldly to the sword-thrusts of implacable Fate. But to ask that fiery being to "rest" in the throes of such fierce warfare is a mockery as if to bid a prisoner "sleep" while

gaolers sear his flesh with red hot irons. So mused Claudius, divining in the barbarian something of his own deep melancholy of soul and constant activity of mind.

Scarcely had the slaves recovered, when the master sickened and fell ill; and it was the barbarian who tended him patiently, tirelessly, seeming immune from fever as from fatigue.

More than once the Centurion thought, "How excellent a soldier would this Northman make."

When the fever had left Claudius, and he was lying in the after-languor,—very weary of body and restless of brain,—he began speaking to Britric on the arts of leadership, the examples of the heroic dead, the might of Rome, and the mental qualities by which Rome's great dominion had been won and vigorously maintained. He spoke to test the caliber of the barbarian's intellect.

Then Britric's spirit glowed and leapt into a flame of grief to think that never again would he march at the head of his own warriors. Very bitter that not even in exile could he win name

or fame or honor. Of what avail the strength of a man, the ardor of a man, the aspirations of a man, when the activity of manhood was forbidden? How long, how long, must he endure this living death?

The Centurion, seeing the despair of the caged eagle in his eyes, uttered at last the question, "Hast thou been a warrior?"

The words were an interrogation; the tone an affirmation.

Britric bowed his head. He could not deliberately deceive the master for whom he had grown to cherish a trusting affection. But reveal his lineage and race,—this would he never do!

"Thou hast commanded men?" said the Roman, and he spoke almost as to an equal.

Then the exile's long-tried fortitude was shaken. The past rose up, and a shuddering sigh broke from his lips. For he felt vividly again the joyous exaltation of his home-coming after his crucial victory, that victory by which he won respect and plaudits from a formidable foeman and from all his people.

"Yea, Claudius, Noble One," he said, "very long

ago I led men into battle. But question me no more."

The unwavering eyes of the Roman looked steadfastly into the eyes of the slave. And while the slave guarded the secret of his bygone rank, the master thought that even thus, noble, gallant, unbroken in spirit though doomed of Fate, might Vercingetorix have appeared, when he flung his sword and shield at the feet of Cæsar, and surrendered himself a sacrifice to save his people.

Claudius warmed to the man whose gaze met his so resolutely, so unflinchingly; and he said, "Very faithfully hast thou served me. And now I will give thee thy freedom."

Britric gazed at him astonished. Then sadly he answered, "Alas, most gracious Claudius, thy mercy is unavailing. An exile till death am I; and to the exile '*freedom*' is but an empty word. A servant and a slave must I be; and where in all the length and breadth of the Roman Empire, could I find a master more truly noble than thyself?"

Claudius made no reply; he was wondering again why he felt more drawn to this reticent barbarian, more nearly kin to him in spirit, than to some of the

Roman warriors and Governors he had known and worked with, who had seemed to him degenerate, unworthy of their great traditions.

He sighed wearily. The lamps had burned low; the night was very still; and in the stillness he listened and waited as if for an answer to some silent question.

Britric, too, watched and waited. But for what was he waiting? For the dawn? But dawn brought him no comfort; each day to him was but as every other day.

No sound broke the hush, till Claudius stirred on his couch, restlessly, impatiently.

In an instant Britric was beside him with a goblet of watered wine. Raising him gently, he held the goblet to his lips.

Little did the master suspect that the servant was consumed with a thirst more burning than his own.

The moon waned; the stars paled; and dawn was approaching when Claudius shut his eyes and slept.

Then Britric cast himself on the floor. But he was beyond sleep. All through the night he had

endured and concealed sharp pains, which now became so violent that he quivered from head to foot. His brain seemed on fire, and his body was tormented even as on the hideous day in the dungeon of the Druids. And again in his ears sounded a roar, as on the frightful morning when the people had reviled him.

He listened. Without, there was yet stillness; not even the stirring of the wind in the palm trees. The roar he heard was but a phantom horror! He set his teeth and strove anew to endure. All his misery he might have borne with that inner exaltaion which comes from consciousness of bravery, could he have carried away the memory of a loving farewell from the slave he had raised to be a Queen. Alas, why had she herself defiled her own fair image in the shrine of his heart? Gone for ever her adoring words and glances; gone her soft caresses and her passionate self-surrender; faded and blurred the sweet endearing memories, blotted out in the black moment when she turned her face away.

Thus he saw her always; thus she was branded upon his soul; and many a time he wondered why

must her image be unfading? Why did the inward wound bleed each day anew? Why did he not grow accustomed to his desolate existence? How much longer could he conceal, day after day, this consuming hunger of a heart which sorrow, deprivation, despair itself, roused only into more flaming and intense emotion?

Terrible the Gods' gift to man of an immortal spirit; for an immortal spirit cramped in a mortal body seems as captive exile.

Britric stifled a groan; his bodily pains had been fast increasing as the fever gripped him. Very ardently he hoped that the sword of Death would grant him release from a life in which there was no gleam of hope nor any flicker of joy.

The Gods he feared not; never could he credit that the Sublime Immortal Ones would stoop to cruelty and hatred. When Death should open the gates into the other world, then would he, Britric, son of Britric, stand up and face the Gods and boldly declare,

"Lo, Divine Ones, gladly I greet ye and salute ye! Weigh me, and give judgment! Proclaim to me if I have been a coward?"

And the Gods—if any Gods there be—must answer,

"Never shall it be said, neither on earth nor in the skies, that Britric son of Britric surrendered his soul to craven fear."

Then would the God of Gods, the King of Kings, the Great Unknown God, unveil His face and say to Britric,

"Faithfully hast thou served Me, remembering the Light in the abyss of darkness. Therefore will I redeem and save thy people."

Even as Britric looked thus to be set free from the prison of his life, a sudden faintness came upon him, as if a cold hand touched his brow and blinded his eyes.

He gasped for breath and shivered. And in that moment Claudius awakened.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE MESSAGE

THE stars glittered golden in a sky of darkest sapphire. The night was still; not even a breath of wind to fan the drooping lilies or to whisper in the cypress trees. And Archias,—praying alone and silently before the altar of his mysterious Unknown God,—felt no thrill of exaltation, no ecstatic soaring of his spirit above earthly loss and sorrow. Rather he felt that weary dark depression which treads so closely on the heels of man's brief moments of upliftment.

On such a night he craved to feel the presence of his dead and ever-belovèd wife Ione speaking through the hush and promising him joyous reunion in a world beyond the stars. But the myriad stars mocked him; and in the silence there seemed to be no revelation, no message of comfort,—only a dreary emptiness.

The very perfume of the lilies, the blackness of the cypresses, oppressed him. The lilies spoke of youth long past, never to be regained; and the shadow of the cypresses was as the shadow of the grave.

Archias sighed impatiently, and turned away from the altar.

After many years seclusion, study, contemplation, aspiration, and resolute searching for a creed which might bring calm contentment, he felt the disgust and weariness which inevitably follow too prolonged a course of mental application without relief of change or movement or any variety of scene.

The visits of his Roman kinsman—while they had stimulated and interested him—had undermined the placidity of his outward habits; and, breaking in on his detached and contemplative philosophy, had re-awakened him to a disturbing consciousness that life is neither a dream nor a calm experiment in thought or theory. It is a battle, which rages without truce or respite.

Archias paced slowly up and down the avenue of cypress. He was not old in years; yet the springs

of youth, of initiative, of hope, of energy, seemed broken in him.

Claudius had come to him for wisdom, inspiration, comfort. And what had he given? What, in truth, had he to give? Nothing but conjectures, uncertain hopes, poetic dreams; and memories, those haunting memories which seemed to have come with him into this world from some far region, the alluring name of which embodies man's eternal longings—*Paradise!*

Archias raised his hands in impotent protest against his loneliness, and against the whispering voice in his heart which would not let him rest.

What of his dreams, his fancies, his most melodious poems, which had seemed like echoes of sublime eternal music? What if all this ecstasy and beauty was illusory? What if the Unknown God were but a figment of imagination, a mirage in the desert? What if love itself had only been illusion?

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," said the inner voice.

But even as Archias bowed his head and was surrendering his mind and soul to this sluggish, subtly powerful stream of blinding, dull depres-

sion, a cool wind blew around him, suddenly, like a breath from the spirit-world he was denying. And it seemed to him as if Ione stood before him, invisible, yet piercing him with her loving, reproachful eyes,—eyes which never in earthly life had needed to reproach him.

Then he strove to speak, imploring one word, one sign to show that love is everlasting, and the soul's life quenchless.

But his voice was powerless; no words could he find to utter the longing of his heart, the immeasurable weariness and hunger.

Then he covered his face in shame and remorse that he, to whom had been granted in the flower of youth a perfect love, a reality more beautiful than even his fairest dreams, he to whom had been revealed the mercy of God reflected in the pure heart of a woman, he to whom had been entrusted the care of a child's soul, so loving, fearless, tranquil, joyous with the joy of generous unsuspecting innocence—he on whom the Gods had lavished these gifts, so far beyond his merit or deserving,—could have presumed to doubt and question and be abjectly despondent.

"Ungrateful man," he exclaimed of himself, "what are *thou* that the Gods should be so patient with thy feebleness?"

And he, who had secretly prided himself on his clean life, his contempt for place and wealth, his loyal fidelity to the dead, his steady devotion to the Gods, now saw himself weak and wavering.

The steadfast, resolute eyes of Claudius seemed to look at him, affectionately yet in disappointment, as if to say, "Is this the one to whom I came for guidance?"

And Archias felt that in the sight of the Supreme Unchanging God, Claudius was the better man, the more deserving of initiation into eternal mysteries, more trained and fitted for the power which only the valiant deserve and only the valiant can be trusted never to misuse.

Then Archias was humbled; and he prayed,

"God of the High Heavens, God of Sun and Moon and Stars, God the Creator, the Eternal Father, the predestined Conqueror, grant me that I may yet be worthy of the friendship of that brave unflinching soldier."

. . . . . .

The myriad stars waned to a silvery pallor, and the sapphire of the sky grew deep almost to blackness, before the golden shafts of dawn shot their arrows of light from the horizon, and the blue-white snows upon Mount Hermon glittered and glowed into a rosy warmth of brightness.

All through the night, little Ione had slept peacefully, dreamlessly, like a flower with its petals folded till the sun should waken it. But as the light of sunrise quivered and gleamed upon the mountain, and a faint soft breeze whispered a greeting to the roses, Ione stirred in her sleep; and, though her eyes were yet closed, her soul was listening and alert. And she thought she stood in a dusty highway where there were many children thronging. Some were richly clad and softly rounded, others thin and poor; some merry and playful; others weary and drooping, with large, sad, wondering eyes. And Ione in their midst was bewildered because they pressed so close around her.

Then she heard a voice, so musical, so tender, so deeply loving, that her eyes filled with happy tears as if she heard the voice of her dead Mother:

"Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not."

She looked up in the direction of the voice; and in her dream she saw it was a man who spoke.

But was he a man? Or could he be the Unknown God,—come down from the Eternal Skies, in a mortal form in answer to the prayers of mortals?

Ione saw his eyes rest tenderly upon her, as if he knew her, had been watching for her, waiting for her.

But so bright the light around him that she was awestruck, dazzled, trembling, even while supremely joyous.

The light grew whiter, brighter, and more radiant. And then Ione wakened, to hear a loud reverberant knocking at the door below her window.

She sat up in bed. The summer dawn was streaming into the room, the familiar room in which she had slept every night of the brief nine years of her tranquil life.

She sprang up and ran across to the east window. Her old nurse slept undisturbed by the insistent

knocking; but Ione peered out and looked down into the courtyard.

There, hammering the door with a huge fist, stood a gigantic Ethiopian; in his other hand a roll of parchment.

"What wouldst thou?" said Ione in her clear childish voice.

The slave looked up; bowed low, and touched his forehead with the parchment.

"From the Centurion Claudius Andronicus," he said; "a message. The fever has left Claudius these three days bypast; but his barbarian servant, whom he prizes above all his servants, is sick unto death. The Centurion prays the noble Archias to come into Capernaum, and bring with him the secret medicines for the fever. Quickly, quickly, or the barbarian will die ere help can come."

The man's guttural voice was husky, his eyes imploring; for he was one of those whom Britric had tended when the epidemic raged; and he had not forgotten.

Not half an hour later, Archias was riding down the narrow white winding road into the town; with

Ione on a mule beside him, and the Ethiopian slave trudging behind.

He would have left little Ione in the house with her nurse; but she had begged and pleaded to go with him. And when he asked, "But why, my Sweet?", she had answered, "Because, my dearest Father, I dreamt the Unknown God walked through the dusty streets in a white robe of radiance, and that He waited there for those who love Him."

Then Archias turned pale with terror. If Ione had seen in a dream the Unknown God, might it not be that the hand of death was on her heart, and that even as her mother had gone, so also would she?

But Ione smiled up at him joyously, merrily; and her eyes were sparkling with health, her sweet face glowing, as she pleaded, "Dear, dear Father; take me."

But when they rode down into the hustling town, —where men of many races jostled and pushed each other, and trafficked and wrangled in a babel of tongues,—in vain did the eager eyes of Ione scan

the crowds and search each face and figure, in hope to see the face of her dream.

In vain she listened for the melodious voice.

Dust and noise, loud turmoil, cursings, discordant laughter, clatter of horses' hoofs, the grinding noise of chariot wheels, the crack of whips, the shrilling cries of street-vendors of skins of water, surged confusingly around her. And she was thankful at last to get out of the heat and glare, into the cool secluded quiet of the Centurion's inner room, which looked on to a shady courtyard covered with a silken awning.

There Claudius met and welcomed them.

"Forgive me, Archias," he said, "but there are not so many honest men in the world that I can reconcile myself to the loss of this barbarian! Haply thy skill may save him. More knowledge of healing hast thou than all the physicians in the city."

But when Archias saw Britric, he spoke no word of hope or comfort; and though his face betrayed nothing of his thoughts, yet Claudius felt that dreary sinking of the heart which says, "Too late, too late!"

Silently the kinsmen went out together into the ante-room.

"Well?" said Claudius.

"By a miracle he may live," replied the Greek; "not otherwise."

## CHAPTER XXII

### IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

AS Britric's bodily strength ebbed, his capacity to feel and think increased.

So long as it had been possible for him to work each day, even though the work must needs be menial, the mere fact of movement, action, although so circumscribed, had helped to keep him master over his own soul.

No matter what he suffered inwardly, no matter how sharply the pains of memory and disillusion gnawed at his heart, yet there was always the consolation of knowing he had neither bent nor broken in the testing.

Everything had been taken from him, love, glory, power, opportunity, even hope itself; everything except the strength to hide his anguish and endure it with unbroken courage.

While he could carry messages for Claudius, disdaining to rest or seek the shade even in the scorch-

ing heat of noonday,—while he had tended the slaves in their sickness, and waited on his master, these occupations, though so humble, gave him some outlet for the force and fire of his nature.

But now, since he was cursed with bodily helplessness, this very fire, which sustained him through so many trials, was turned into a sharp tormentor.

All the happenings of his career, every joy and every grief from earliest childhood to the present instant, seemed to come to life again as an embodied thought, which, once given form, could not be quenched, or stamped out of existence.

Though the events had happened singly, yet the memories thronged all together; and Britric could hear in one and the same instant the soft beguiling music of Giséla's voice when she acclaimed him as her star, her God, her King and her True Lover,—and the terrified, confused dismay of her repudiation of all love even in the very hour when he felt he had best earned and merited the trusting adoration she had erstwhile given. The acclamations of his people when they greeted him as saviour and deliverer, and their groans and roarings of derision when the Druids branded him an outcast, these con-

flicting cries now beat on his soul like two opposing hurricanes.

He could not lift his head, nor speak. Helpless as when he had been bound with thongs and flung into the subterranean dungeon, he lay prone, not able even to turn or stir. But despite this weakness of his limbs, his senses became preternaturally sharpened. Not even in his boyish days of prowess as a hunter and a woodsman had his ear been half so sensitive to sound. But now the sounds exasperated his brain, beating on it, lacerating it, even as the red hot irons of the Druids had lacerated his strong body.

Pain of body he had disdained; but those wounds, long after the outer scars were healed, had left their inward marks upon his spirit; and the inward wounds had widened and deepened till his entire being felt like one vast wound.

And now it seemed as if the pain of his mind was eating into the fibers of his body. Every nerve and sinew, every muscle, every vein, throbbed with an independent life, defying, tearing, rending Britric.

Habituated as he had been to discipline his mind

and thoughts as a Commander disciplines an army, he chafed at this rebellion of his forces.

Incoherence, inconsistency, the clash of mere brute instinct against reason, the mutiny of the flesh against the spirit, had not hitherto invaded the citadel of his heart. Even his passion for Giséla—sudden, unwise, ill-fated—had never been ignoble; nor could it die, for it was indissolubly wedded to his pity for the weak and helpless.

In the deepest desolation he had been characterized by that unwavering constancy, that loyal inviolate fidelity, which prompts the fighting spirit to stand up resolutely to the blows of Fate, and never dream of weak surrender.

But since he had been smitten with this fever, since spirit and body seemed to have escaped from his control, and both were rioting with the hectic violence of a mob, clamorous and confusing, he felt the very foundations of his being tumble into chaos.

In the nightmare of his torment, he wondered if he had ceased to be a man, and had been changed by some dire magic into a harp echoing every voice and vibrating at every touch.

The footsteps of slaves passing and repassing in

the inner court, the breath of the hot wind among the oleanders, the neighing of the horses in the stables, the crash of a breaking water-jar as some weary woman dropped it on the marble pavement, these and a myriad of common sounds smote on him and entered into him, until he seemed part of everything he heard.

The pain in his limbs, the burning in his brain, even the devouring thirst, disturbed him less than the loss of his former power to curb his thoughts.

At the same moment lucid and conflicting, disconnected and compelling, the images crowding upon his consciousness seemed each to drag him in directions opposite to all the others. As he had been deprived of outward royalty, so he now seemed robbed of control over his inner life.

So bitterly humiliating this condition, that he was reduced to longing for rest, forgetfulness, and peace. And to feel abject craving for mere peace, to hunger like this for a dull negative oblivion, appeared to Britric a most despicable sinking to the lowest depths of weakness.

Had he been born to love and suffer and aspire,

only in the end to yearn for a blank nothingness?

Was mankind a herd of cattle, bred and fattened for the shambles? Was the love of man for woman sprung from a blind instinct shared with beasts and vermin?

Britric sickened at the thought; and he began to wonder if his Mother's Unknown God of Love and Mercy had been only a fantasy, a beautiful illusion; and had he too been brain-sick and deluded?

To worship an Unknown God of Mercy when the world was merciless; to dream of love, as potent and all-healing, when bitterest experience had proved the shallowness of woman's love; to challenge and defy the evil spirits ever subtly whispering in the ear of man and luring him to ruin, —this, Britric believed to be the line of action for a spiritual warrior, a being conscious of an inner kinship with a God more noble than himself, a regal God, mysterious, veiled, but potent to inspire and sustain and strengthen.

But his blood turned icy; for suddenly, appallingly, a doubt of his own sanity shot subtle poison all through his soul and body. Perhaps not calumny but revelation, not envious lying but a

stubborn fact, had prompted the Druids to brand him as a madman, and to strip him of his crown and sceptre! And had Giséla been no coward but a wise inspired devotee when she had turned her face away from the mad King, who fought a losing battle striving to save the victims from the butcher's knife of the Arch-Druid?

To all appearance Britric lay unconscious; but though he scarcely seemed to breathe, his soul was face to face with such terrifying doubt that he recoiled in horror far more profound than he had felt while actively confronting and defying evil.

The direst anguish, the most frightful cruelty, can be endured so long as a man believes unwaveringly that the Powers of Light must be the ultimate conquerors. Even if he may not live to see the victory, yet the conviction that he fights upon the side predestined to a lasting triumph, will give him courage in despair and calmness in the midst of turmoil.

But rob him of his faith, and tell him he has fought for an illusion; show him how his highest aspirations, his most loving tenderness, his strong-

est resolution and most ardent valor, have but been worked upon by devils to beguile him,—and then his very reason totters!

. . . . . .

It was the hour between midnight and dawn.

The Centurion Claudius had dismissed his servants to sleep, but he stayed watching beside the couch of the barbarian.

In the Libyan desert he had seen many a strong man die of fever; and each time the sudden smiting down of one who a little while agone had been alert and vigorous, saddened him and drew out the hidden tenderness of a nature as deep and steadfast as it was reticent and self-controlled. But not even when some of his own most tried and trusted soldiers had been stricken to death in the grim desert, had Claudius felt more poignant sorrow than for this man whose name and country were unknown to him.

With instinctive power to see into the hearts of men, to penetrate the outer wall of circumstance, and estimate the inner value of all human beings he encountered, Claudius swiftly had overleapt the barriers of race and language, and had learnt to

know his servant almost without an interchange of words.

The current of sympathy which flowed out from his spirit into the heart of the barbarian, and back again, had deepened and widened steadily since the first moment his eyes met the eyes of the slave in the discordant market-place of Rome.

But never by a look or a gesture had this slave presumed upon the kindness of the master; never had he deviated from the steady deference of a respectful servant. Though the Centurion had lately come to speak to him almost as to a personal friend, never had the barbarian encroached a fraction on his lenience.

This especial night, while the slave tossed in delirium, although the words escaping him were in a language none of the servants understood, nor even Claudius, yet the Centurion felt marked repugnance to the thought of any except himself observing the tortured ravings of a man whose dignity and self-control had hitherto been such that slavery was powerless to degrade him.

Claudius sighed; unless by a sheer miracle he

did not see how the barbarian could live. The man was broken; and better for him to die that very night than drag out a lingering death in a wrecked body, palsied, helpless, useless.

Yet Claudius grieved to see him sinking, growing weaker every hour.

With that innate delicacy and scrupulous honor found sometimes in strong intellects and dominating characters, Claudius curbed his thoughts when he found himself endeavoring to deduce from the barbarian's delirious outcries the story of his inner life. That the words were quite incomprehensible did not prevent the Centurion feeling what these words conveyed. This man had been a leader, a gallant warrior. His voice had rung out with a note of confident command that there was no mistaking; such a note as Claudius had heard in his own voice, rallying his soldiers in the moments of most crucial danger, when man's courage is tested to the utmost and is not found wanting.

Nor could he mistake the rapturous murmur, the sudden softening of tone, when the clarion-call to action melted into a strain of exquisite tenderness.

This man had loved,—his heart had been lavished, ungrudgingly, entirely, after the fashion of such as know not how to measure in the giving.

It was then, when Claudius heard the shout of victory change to a low murmur, that he shut his eyes, lest he be tempted to look deep into the secrets of one who in waking hours never had laid aside the armor of reserve.

There had been something spartan in the barbarian's steady resolve to hide all wounds. But Claudius, by subtle divination, felt the hidden sorrow.

While the Centurion, after a long hot day on duty, drilling new recruits, had chosen to forgo his sleep rather than leave the dying slave to the care of servants, Britric's tormented spirit had been swirled out into the tossing ocean of memories. But now a veil of darkness shrouded his eyes. Though the lamp burned steadily and the moonlight streamed in through the window, he could not see the Centurion's face. He thought himself alone and utterly deserted.

All his life he had been mad, but now he was

wise, knowing that his gracious God, his love, his aspirations, had been only dreams! The chill of death was creeping up and nearing his heart; and the end of all was nothingness!

So a voice at his ear seemed to whisper; not angrily but very calmly, adjuring him to be a man and to face the truth in all its naked ugliness,—not weakly cling to follies of illusion which see stars in dust and rainbow colors in the ashes.

Britric felt calm at last. The pain had gone from his limbs, the throbbing from his brain. A merciful faintness succeeded the sharp tormenting violence of thought and feeling.

Life seemed to be ebbing slowly, quietly. Not even Giséla's averted facc was branded upon his memory now. A mist enshrouded her.

The flame of Britric's spirit died down to a heap of ashes. No fabled phœnix would ever rise from that extinguished fire! Love, faith, valor, aspiration,—burnt-out cinders one and all!

The chill crept closer and closer to his heart.

Oblivion and death! What more could he desire? What matter that the worms would eat his body, and his bones would rot, and his name perish?

Childless, alone, the last of his line, an exile he would die, and be forgotten. Never would any mourn for him.

Even as the word "forgotten" formed itself in his weary brain, he became aware of some one bending over him; and he heard a long-drawn sigh.

He strove to raise his eyelids, but a weight was pressing on them. He could not speak. And again it seemed as if he drifted away, down the dull languid stream, creeping sluggishly, surely, to the Sea of Nothingness.

Another moment and the sea would have engulfed him.

Once more he heard the sigh; then felt on his face something like a drop of summer rain.

Could it be a tear?

But who would shed a tear for him? No living woman loved him.

As if from very far away, a voice reached his dim consciousness; not any words he could distinguish, but he recognized the voice. His master, Claudius, was speaking,—a blessing, a prayer, or a farewell.

Then a flood of light poured into the soul of

Britric. The fog of nothingness was lifted; the web of lies was broken. He was not mad; nor ever had been, except in the blind hour when he listened to the subtle demon whispering that valor is in vain and love a dream, and man but as the beasts that perish.

Not the prison of the grave, but glorious freedom; not the flickering out of life, but glad promotion into eternal life, awaited the delivered spirit.

If a Centurion of Imperial Rome could grieve for the dying of a nameless slave, if this reticent strong Claudius, the very embodiment of stately self-command, could shed even one tear over the silent passing of Britric, then Britric had not lived in vain. Though he had lost the love of his wife, his warriors, his people, though none of his own race and blood had befriended him, not even one, yet in slavery and exile he had met the friend denied to him in his own country.

But even as a mysterious peace suffused his soul, the current of pain began to flow back into the nerves and muscles of his body, and the throbbing in his head started again.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE DREAM

CLAUDIUS felt rather than saw the change in Britric; but it seemed no respite, only a prolonging of the agony. And there came upon him that craving for action which is the strong man's way of meeting sorrow. To sit and watch this sinking of the flame of life, and to do nothing more to fight against approaching Death, this was intolerable!

He rose, walked quietly to the door and opened it, and passed through to the outer room in quest of Archias.

There was a murmuring of voices. Archias was awake, and sitting up. Beside him stood the child Ione, her face luminously pale, her gray eyes shining; her tiny hand outstretched.

"He will come," she said. "He is coming. Claudius will find Him."

"Whom shall I find, sweet Ione?" asked the Centurion, "and how comest thou to be wakeful?"

"It is daybreak," whispered Ione, "and at noon the Unknown God will send the healing I have prayed for. Thy servant shall not die."

Claudius was amazed, astounded. He did not speak.

"Hearken to my dream," Ione said. "Into the midst of many changing shadows—some pale gray and cloudy, others dark and stifling—I saw, advancing towards thee, One clad all in white. Up to the skies he looked, and prayed; and from the skies came shafts of radiance, which glowed and shone around him, and dispelled the shadows. Towards the light I saw thee walking, Claudius, great wonder in thy heart, and hope and reverence. As to a King thou didst bow thy head, and I could hear thy voice, very strong but gentle, pleading and entreating. Nought for thyself didst thou ask, neither wealth nor glory nor promotion. Thou didst but ask the healing of thy servant. And before I heard the answer, I awakened. Yet sure am I that thy petition shall be granted."

The child's voice was so tranquil, so supremely

confident, that the Centurion was awestruck. Little had he looked for any message from the skies; ever throughout his life the Heavens had been dumb when he had sought the Gods for reënforcement. His lifelong belief in a hidden God of Justice had been rather a principle than an emotion, rather a yearning than a hope.

Loneliness of spirit, isolation in the midst of multitudes; much service, toil, and hardship, and deep-rooted grief for the dire evils he clearly saw and yet could not prevent,—such was the stern experience of Claudius.

Silently he gazed on Ione. Never in any Temple of the Gods had he felt such a hush of peace.

But Archias soon broke the silence.

"Go to thy bed, my sweet one," he said to the child; "and sleep. Trust Claudius to seek and to find!"

Ione folded her hands as if in prayer.

"Very faithful is our kinsman," she said; "well has he loved the Unknown God. And great shall be his recompense."

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE QUEST

AS soon as Claudius arrived at the quarters of the XIIIth Legion, he sought out the Chief Captain and inquired whether there had been any private message from Rome, heralding the visit of some famous stranger, some renowned philosopher or wise physician.

"Nay, Claudius," said the Chief Captain, "Nought have I received from Rome; and little do I know of any new arrivals, save only some fabulously wealthy merchants from Phœnicia, come to Capernaum in hope to grow still richer."

Then Claudius bethought of asking tidings of the Nazarene Jesus.

"What is this Nazarene to thee?" said the Chief Captain; "I know him not."

"Not yet have I seen him," replied Claudius, "but when he returns into the city I would have speech with him."

It was not till the hour before noon that the Centurion at last was free to seek for the compassionate Being of Ione's dream, though who that might be he knew not.

Alone he went forth on foot. But where to go—which way to turn—perplexed him acutely.

As he passed out under the massive archway carved with tributes to the Roman victories, though in his step there was no hesitation, yet there came over him a wave of startled surprise, almost of dismay, that he, habituated to the grim realities of life, should now be looking for fulfillment of a vision seen by a young child.

Might it not be that Ione, in the exquisite purity of her innocent soul, had fashioned a God akin to her own self? For even as vile fancies give birth to vilest idols, so the generous and compassionate look to find the Gods magnanimous, faithful, tender as themselves.

The Centurion felt heavy at heart. In the glare and dust of the streets, amid the stir and turmoil of the city, the Invisible World seemed utterly unreal, and the Gods a fantasy of the human mind. But habits of promptitude and energy were so in-

grained in Claudius that he walked swiftly on, determined to do the utmost in his power to respond to the strange message. He walked as vigorously as if he had slept all through the night, instead of watching and waiting beside the couch of a dying man, through the loss of whom his lonely, self-sacrificing life would be the lonelier.

Various passers-by, who made way for the officer of haughty Rome, could little have suspected the nature of his quest.

The scorching sun beat on his helmet and breastplate so pitilessly that he crossed to the shady side of the Damascus Road. Then he walked yet more swiftly. He did not fail to scan, with direct and searching glances, the face of any traveler whose expression or demeanor showed unusual strength, distinction, or dignity. Yet he saw none who might be the Inspired Being of Ione's dream.

In her presence he had been conscious of a wonderful calm joy, which radiated from her when she breathed her prophecy of hope. Her eyes shining, her voice sweet as the echo of a far-away melody from the Eternal Heavens, she was the incarnation of such innocent and touching faith that Claudius

could not bring himself to doubt her vision. But now his mind had been invaded by that subtle spirit of reaction which too often follows upon rare uplifted moments of ecstatic inspiration. And proportionate to the heights to which the soul has risen, so is the descent to earth humiliating, mournful, and confusing.

Though Ione's words were graven on his memory, yet Claudius dreaded lest the only healing for his servant would be a healing of the spirit in a life beyond the tomb.

He stood still for a moment, and considered. Then he turned out of the stone-paved main road, and made his way down a narrow and crowded street leading through the fishermen's quarter.

Who could tell what traveler might be coming now across the Sea of Galilee?

Possibly some boatman might be able to say if Jesus the Nazarene was yet expected; for Claudius remembered that this Jesus was rumored to have friends and followers among the fishermen; rough and rugged men, but commonly more honest than the publicans and traders. And mayhap Jesus of

Nazareth would bring him tidings of the Unknown Being he was seeking.

Crossing the street Claudius jostled by accident against an elderly Jew priest, who darted back at him a look of such malevolent antagonism as to check the apology the Roman was about to offer.

Claudius, from personal observation in many lands, had no exalted opinion of priests as a class. He could better imagine men of action opening their ears to receive the teachings of a new Pythagoras; for men of action, bred in readiness to face death for a principle of duty, appeared to him—even at their crudest and most ignorant—warmer of heart and less constricted in mind than any priesthood the world as yet had known.

He who, in the desert, had seen one of his fever-stricken soldiers resign a drink of water to a comrade, and had observed among them many such actions of unconscious generosity and spontaneous kindness, felt that the essentials of valor, rectitude and truth were easier to find in loyal soldiers than in the ranks of the professional reciters of long-winded prayers,—men whose prayers would

quickly change to curses against any human being with a wider outlook than their own.

If the Unknown God ever should send down to the Hebrew people a Messiah, a spirit of transcendent love and beauty, then woe to the Divinity caged in the prison-house of flesh! How could He touch the hearts of a race which would reject even the God of Gods if the Supreme One did not follow rather than attempt to lead the priesthood?

Claudius paused a moment in his walk. The sun burned with an almost blinding brightness; but he felt an inward chill, a sad foreboding, a strange impersonal grief, thinking that if even *he* was so revolted by the clashing discords of the world, the baseness, weakness, cruelty, and obstinate blindness of mankind, how much more acutely would those evils torture an Immortal, a Divine One, should any such come down to earth in mortal form.

Claudius almost could have wished that such a Being might be spared the bitter anguish of contact with those age-long evils.

As this feeling deepened, the Centurion ceased to observe the passers-by. The hum and bustle of

the traffic came as if from a far distance. Every outer sensation was lost in a sudden overwhelming dread lest he, though living a life of strenuous devotion to his duty, had given but insufficient service to the Highest, even while he deemed himself consistent in adherence to the noblest principles he had thought possible of practical fulfillment.

He walked on until he reached the stately Quay, completed recently by order of Tiberius Cæsar.

Hence plied multi-colored craft, to and from Hippos, Magdala and Bethsaida.

Claudius made his way through a little crowd of fishers, boatmen, and travelers, till he stood close by a flight of marble steps, and looked across the inland sea.

The sun was glittering on the waters with such dazzling brightness that his eyes ached in the glare. His brain was beginning to suffer from an unaccustomed tiredness; and his heart sank with dread lest his servant die before Ione's prophecy could be accomplished. And at the thought of how sharp a disillusion it would be to the trusting child if her God could fail her, Claudius felt a pang of remorse for his own weary apprehension. For a life-time

he had inwardly craved to find the Unknown God; and now how could he flag and sink into passive weariness when the child relied on him to be obedient to the vision?

Close by the place where he was standing, a boat had just been brought alongside the Quay; but though Claudius had heard the plash of oars, and the sound of footsteps, he scarcely heeded them; for he was feeling strangely humbled, as if he were in part responsible even for the very evils he deplored.

But his face gave little sign of his emotion.

As he stood immersed in thought—resolutely hoping that the child's faith might not be in vain,—he heard some deep rough voices; and then a voice far other than the voices of the fisherfolk; a voice in which melody and power, dignity and tenderness were mingled. And though the words were no more than the salutation customary among Jews, the tones arrested the Centurion's attention; and he turned to see who might be speaking.

# CHAPTER XXV

## THE MIRACLE

IN the Centurion's house there was a hush and silence. It was the hottest hour of the day; and in this hour the slaves were wont to lie down on the marble pavement of the inner court and rest under the shade of a dark awning which screened them from the sun's pitiless glare.

But to-day there was one who could not find any rest or merciful forgetfulness. While the others slept, the giant Ethiopian squatted beneath the window of the room where the barbarian lay dying. And though his features were immobile as a statue of black marble, in his eyes there was dumb misery, as in the eyes of a faithful dog who knows his master will never whistle for him again or give him any word of greeting.

To those who have nothing, a very little makes a feast. The northern barbarian was the one man

who had befriended the Ethiopian since that rebellious giant had been taken prisoner and sold into slavery.

Although Claudius Andronicus was never cruel or capricious, although his slaves served him with at least a measure of willingness, recognizing him as just and steadfast, yet the Ethiopian had many a time felt the bread of servitude choking in his throat, and a dull smoldering anger against all his conquerors seethed in his soul till he had become a veritable incarnation of dark hatred. Helpless to give voice to his emotions, helpless to take action of any kind against the victors, yet never forgetting that he once had been a warrior, this man's very spirit writhed in bondage. When the northern barbarian first had come, the Ethiopian regarded him mistrustfully and jealously. But between men who have been soldiers there is a subtle affinity; and even though one of the slaves was born royal, and the other had been only a javelin-bearer of the lowest rank, though in race and language they were so very far apart, yet the Ethiopian after a while began to know instinctively that the barbarian had read his heart and penetrated his outer mask

of dreary resignation. There sprung up then between these two, so vastly dissimilar, one of those strange affections born of misfortune. And when Britric tended the slaves all through the violent epidemic of malignant fever, the Ethiopian's last shred of jealous distrust was swept away in a flood of gratitude.

And now he sat waiting miserably, while the shadow of death crept closer and closer, and the crushing wretchedness of fast-approaching desolation pressed on his soul with a weight of hopelessness which bewildered him even while it tortured.

Not thus, he thought, should the bright-eyed, fair-haired one be dying; but in battle, mounted on a stately elephant; and leading men to victory. If he must die, it should have been with jewel-hafted scimitar in hand, amidst the clash of arms and clang of martial music; fighting, fighting, fighting to the end!

And at the thought of the strong warrior sinking into the grave, dying of fever and palsy even in the flower of his splendid youth,—dying while so many weary agèd men lived on and cumbered the earth,—the Ethiopian's heart sank in despair, and

his mind was torn with savage anger against whatsoever Gods there be.

Meanwhile Britric lay unconscious,—Archias watching beside him, and waiting in a degree of suspense which amazed himself. What, after all, was the life of a barbarian slave that it should seem so precious in the eyes of Claudius Andronicus? Who and what was this man that Ione should have dreams and visions of his healing?

For love of Ione, Archias had said no word of doubt. The child had her mother's eyes, and each time she spoke of the Unknown God, those eyes were radiant with such ecstatic peace as Archias had seen long ago on the face of one woman,—the one, the only one whom he had ever worshiped. Therefore, for true love's sake, he struggled to hope and believe; but it seemed to him the Angel of Death was already overshadowing the barbarian, and that it would be miraculous if Claudius or any other could prevail on this grim Angel to turn aside and to forego his victim.

In the ante-room Ione was alone, her soul uplifted in prayer. Never had she wavered in her

certainty that the Unknown God would listen and hear, and like a gracious King do justice. Very tranquil her faith; she knew so little of mankind that it was the easier for her never to doubt God's mercy. Into her short happy life no harshness had entered yet, no bitterness, no jarring note of discord. Encircled with love, she had never felt, nor could imagine, the cruel power of hate. Herself the embodiment of truth and frankness, generous and tender, ardent and warm of heart, pitying even the caged song-bird or the fluttering terror of the moth singed in the torch-flame, what could she know of the brutalities of life?

Archias sighed, wondering what the future held in store for her, and how long her joyous faith would survive the innocence of childhood?

It was noon. Ione rose from her knees, and ran gently but swiftly into the inner room. And as she reached the barbarian's bedside, Britric stirred and opened his eyes. He looked at her as if she were a figure in some beautiful dream which must dissolve if he broke the spell by speaking.

Archias watched in silence.

Then Ione put her slender little fingers on the barbarian's forehead.

"The Unknown God has healed thee," she said, her voice not tremulous but calmly triumphant. "Arise and make ready to greet my kinsman Claudius on his home-coming. He has been sorely grieved to see thee suffer, and will much rejoice now that thy pains are ended."

Still Britric looked at her as if she were a being of another region. He felt as if his spirit had come from a far distance; and as yet he was dazed, confused, and knew not how to answer.

Ione withdrew her hand; and then he essayed to raise himself. In a moment he was sitting up; the power had come back to his limbs, the torturing pain in his head had passed like a nightmare. A current of new strength was flowing all through his veins; and he felt himself already restored to that physical vigor the value of which he never fully realized until he lost it.

Ione looked into his eyes, with a frank happy smile, the transparent expression of her soul.

Tenderly, proudly, the child gazed at the man whose unconscious dignity and silent fortitude, even

in the first moment of beholding him, drew forth her admiration.

But as Britric met her eyes, so fearless, so unclouded, so inspiring in their beauty, a pang of bitter anguish shot through his spirit. This child of alien race and alien language, to whom he was but a captive, a barbarian, a nameless slave, *she*, to whom he was only this, could look at him with tenderest compassion. But his own belovèd wife whom he had crowned and worshiped, whom he had trusted as a messenger from the eternal Heavens, she, alas, had won him only to reject him. Never could he forget how she had turned her face away! And so the brightness of Ione's eyes wounded him instead of healing; for though he deemed her lovely with a loveliness transcending woman's beauty, though he recognized in the child one who by her very existence on earth was giving light in darkness,—though he saw in her even such a soul as he had dimly but yearningly been seeking ever since his boyhood,—yet she brought him no joy but only added sorrow. Had she not come into his life too late, too late!

It was not the gulf of years between them that

built up the insuperable barrier; nor even his servitude to her kinsman Claudius; nor yet the difference in their race and language; for Britric was one who could have loved without hope of recompense, had but his inner spirit been contented. The barrier was Giséla. And although Giséla had abandoned and forsaken him, though she had never loved him in the way he had at first imagined, yet what was done was done. He had vowed his love to her, and never could he withdraw it. He knew that were he standing even at the very gates of Heaven, and were Ione within, and waiting to unbar those gates, yet he must turn back and go down to earth, go down to Hell itself, if thence he heard the trembling voice of Giséla calling him to save her from the cruelty of men and demons.

Inconstant, wavering, full of fears, had she not all the more need of love,—the love which no disaster can quench, no unkindness turn to hatred, no absence or distance chill into indifference?

As the child Ione looked at him, so gladly, so trustingly, he knew she would never fail even the meanest, poorest creature who relied on her. But a veil of mist came between his eyes and hers; and

he felt as if from the starry heights of a great mountain he was falling down, deep down, into a bottomless pit, where there was neither sunlight nor pure water, nor any gleam of hope or brightness.

And he said in his heart, "They will point to me as to one brought back from death to life; but I come rather from life to death."

Then with a resolute effort he rallied his courage to take up the burden laid on him.

"Noble Ione," he said in his hesitating Aramaic, "to thy prayers my heart tells me I owe this healing of my body. Pray now, I beseech thee, to thine Unknown God that He will show me some way to do Him service."

He spoke out of his innate courtesy, so as not to chill or wound the child whose joy had been so overflowing. But already a faint shadow from his misery had reached her spirit. As she gazed at him her eyes grew liquid with tears, and he saw she felt—although she could not understand—his sorrow.

Then he was humbled to the dust. Had he not striven all his life to serve the God of Love and Mercy, and to bring hope and comfort into the

world? And yet he was allowing the shadow of his own irreparable grief to dim the brightness of an innocent child's delight.

Two tears rolled down her face, but her voice was ringing with hope as she spoke, very tenderly, very sweetly,

"I pray the Unknown God to give thee many services to do for Him. Thou shalt be His warrior."

. . . . . .

When Ione came with her father from the room where Britric had been brought back out of the clutches of Death, she remembered the piteous expression in the eyes of the giant Ethiopian when he had pleaded that Archias should come to the sufferer "quickly, quickly," lest it be too late. So she sent for the slave and told him the good tidings. And the Ethiopian prostrated himself on the ground, and touched her sandalled feet with his forehead; and muttered broken guttural words of thankfulness.

It was at this moment that the Centurion came in.

Archias saw at a glance that there was a change in him. Always Claudius had been calm and self-

reliant, equable in manner, reticent and quietly commanding, giving out strength to all around him. But in his stern, dark eyes, so quick to pierce through fallacies and see the ugliness under the specious mask of gaiety and beauty, there had hitherto been a melancholy none the less poignant because so rarely expressed.

And now this melancholy had vanished; in its place was an inspiring hope which shone out even before any word was uttered.

"The barbarian is healed," said Archias. "At noon he wakened, calm and lucid in mind, the fever and palsy gone from him even as by a miracle."

For a moment Claudius did not answer; he was pondering how to set forth clearly that which was beyond description.

Ione signed to the Ethiopian to arise from the floor, and the slave was leaving the room when his master called him back. Claudius remembered the man's distress when the barbarian had been smitten with what seemed a mortal illness.

"Stay," he said, "and what thou hearest thou shalt relate to all my servants; and in their hours of leisure they may go forth and see and hear for

themselves this Jesus of Nazareth,—who resembles no other Jew that is or ever has been."

His deep-toned voice rang with the note of command habitual to him; yet it seemed gentler.

"A conquered race the Jews," he said, "and conquered through their arrogant presumption that their God would always give them victory though they would not hearken to His warnings nor train themselves to fight in the defense of their own nation. God is not called upon to fight for cowards. And so they were attacked and overthrown, and in shame and servitude they toiled longtime as captives by the waters of Babylon. And yet their hearts were stubborn. Still are they stubborn, with a pride fostered and fed by their harsh narrow priesthood. Yet may they be changed from rebels against God to warriors of God, will they but hearken to this Jesus."

Archias gazed in astonishment at his kinsman; but he asked no question. And Ione also waited.

"Thou knowest," said the Roman, "how, some little while past, I sent to seek this Nazarene and bring him here that I might speak with him as to the doctrines he is teaching. But when I beheld

him face to face, I was amazed I erstwhile so little realized how great a Master I had thought to summon to my dwelling."

As the Centurion spoke, Britric appeared in the doorway leading from the inner room.

Claudius greeted him with a gesture, and resumed his narrative.

"Scarce can I describe in words how the Nazarene with one swift look awakened in me a deeper homage than I ever felt for any potentate on earth. Many a mighty King have I seen; many a leader and commander; many a priest invested with a seeming sanctity, but in this Jesus—come of the royal race that so long has ceased to rule over the Jews—I beheld one whose kingship is of the everlasting spirit. From a higher royalty than that of earthly Kings is the dignity and majesty of his all-comprehending eyes."

There was another spell of silence.

Ione watched her kinsman, breathlessly, eagerly, her face pale with emotion.

Britric looked from her to the Centurion, then back to her again; and then he stared into space, and the flickering hope in his eyes was dimmed with ap-

prehension. Never had hope led him otherwhere than to disaster. Much he distrusted hope.

But the stern face of Claudius was as if lighted from within, and his voice rang out yet more powerfully,

"When I looked upon Jesus then was I filled with remorse for all my imperfections, and for the blindness of men's souls. But I took courage and proffered my petition: 'Lord, my servant lieth in my house sick of the palsy, grievously tormented.' He answered, 'I will come and heal him.' Then was I shamed afresh at the remembrance how I would have sent for Jesus as for a common scholar or a rhetorician to be questioned. So I bowed my head and answered, 'Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof. Do but say the word and my servant shall be healed.' As I spoke thus I could feel the power of the Unknown God flowing through his spirit. Even as I, Claudius, am nought in myself and yet am much in that the might of the Roman Empire is behind me, so may a mortal man reflect some of the majesty of God the King of Kings. Yet as I bethought me of this, I knew I wronged the Nazarene by the com-

parison. His Kingdom is so immeasurably nobler than any Empire of this sin-stained world; and though he be mortal man, I felt that his transcendent spirit is united to the spirit of the One, the Everlasting, the Unchanging, and that there is not, nor has been, nor yet shall be another like him."

Again there was a hush; again hope awakened in Britric's eyes.

"So," said the Centurion, "when I beheld the fishermen and traders who stood around look amazed that I a Roman officer could speak thus to a Jew, calling him Lord and bowing low before him, I marvelled that any man could gaze on him and fail to pay him homage. Therefore I spake in a voice all could hear: 'Lord, do but say the word and my servant shall be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having under myself soldiers; and I say unto one "Go," and he goeth, and to another "Come," and he cometh, and to my servant "Do this," and he doeth it.' Thus in mine own fashion, being not eloquent, I strove to show, in the presence and hearing of many, that I felt in Jesus a majesty from on high, an authority which none may dispute, for it reaches from the Creator of the Universe,

down through many grades; and even the spirit of disease must bow to it and go hence at the word of power."

Claudius drew a deep breath. "Even while I was dreading lest my speech convey not clearly the thoughts of my heart, Jesus turned to those that were with him and said, 'Verily I say unto you I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.' Then was I astounded. Strange it seemed that *I* should be able to see in him the greatness so many of his own race and blood deny! They call him a 'Sabbath breaker,' a 'blasphemer,' a fit associate for 'publicans and sinners!' Blind are their eyes; and much I wonder wherefore so sublime a spirit has come into mortal form a Jew! As I stood looking upon him, he spake again to his disciples: 'Many shall come from the east and the west and shall sit down with Abraham in the Kingdom of Heaven; but the sons of the Kingdom shall be cast forth into the outer darkness.' I know not what this may mean, unless that Jesus the Jew would fain bring the word of God to all races and every people, and that the Jews no more may deem themselves, as hitherto, the only people chosen of Jehovah."

The Centurion paused, and looked at Britric, who stood in the doorway facing him, thin and worn from the effects of fever and much pain, his face still very weary, but strong, unflinching, resolute,—the face of a warrior. Claudius looked to him to make some comment, but it was Archias who spoke.

"And then, what befel thee; how didst thou part from Jesus?"

"I saluted him," said Claudius, "and he returned my salutation; and as a King to a tried servant, as a Commander to a trusted soldier, he spake, dismissing me, 'As thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.' And I knew my servant's life was saved then at the hour of noon, even as Jesus uttered these words."

"At the hour of noon," said Ione, "yea, at the very moment thou wert speaking with the Heaven-Born, thy servant wakened from death to life. So is the prophecy fulfilled, and all our prayers are answered."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### "HOW LONG, O GOD, HOW LONG?"

THOUGH the Centurion appeared to have found the inward peace he so long had craved but scarcely had expected to experience on earth, and though little Ione was radiant with a happiness so tranquil, so unclouded, that it seemed almost divine, Britric himself, in the weeks that followed his restoration to perfect health of body, felt less like a man who has received a benefit than like a captive, who, on the eve of release, incurs a new and heavier sentence. The most merciful thing, he thought, would have been to have let him die. But in so thinking, he inwardly reproached himself for churlish ingratitude to Claudius, Archias and Ione, each of whom rejoiced in his healing as in a miracle.

To Britric it was no miracle to be forced to go on living, but rather it seemed an instance of that

irony and perversity of fortune which had pursued him relentlessly ever since he had challenged fate at the Stones of Sacrifice, by openly declaring his worship of the Unknown God.

And now, to be dragged back from the very verge of the grave aroused in him no thankfulness but only a great weariness of spirit.

Even the Druids had claimed power to heal; it was the other aspect of their power to smite. Britric had known the grim Arch-Druid by a touch of his hand make men sleep and forget their pain; and from afar the Druids could cast sickness on those they hated, and could lift away the sickness when the victim had been terrified into submission. Therefore although the healing of Britric caused Claudius and all his household to believe implicitly in the Heaven-given powers of Jesus the Jew of Nazareth, Britric felt only a deeper melancholy, and a fear lest his new-found friends were dooming themselves to cruel disappointment. When in a mere healer they thought they had discovered the Son of the Supreme God, Britric wondered at what seemed to him extraordinary credulity; and of all the servants in the employ of Claudius, he was the

only one who did not avail himself of the permission to go out and hear the words of Jesus.

But his sympathy for the feelings of those who deemed him benefited, compelled him to reticence. He had not the heart even by a word or a look to cast the faintest shadow over their satisfaction. For Ione most of all he felt anxiety and foreboding; he dreaded the moment when she must waken and understand the vileness of the world and the callous insensibility of the High Gods. Her trusting faith reminded him of the impassioned certainty with which he himself erstwhile had looked to the Unknown God as to one who could never fail or waver. And where had this devotion led him? To slavery; to exile!

Easy, he thought, for Claudius to be happy! Had he not the glory and unbroken prestige of Imperial Rome behind him? (Even Britric as long as he had a sword by his side, and men under his command, had readily believed in a just deity!) For Archias too, how facile to embrace a benevolent and consoling faith! Might not any man feel calm assurance of the favor of a gentle God of Mercy

when God had granted him to be the parent of so lovely a child as little Ione?

Though Britric outwardly fell back into all his former occupations, and appeared contented, the cry of "How long, O God, how long?" went up silently from the depths of his heart. In the presence of Ione, his grief for Giséla became only the more insistent.

Yet on the day when Archias and Ione set out for their home on the heights,—Claudius riding with them to the outskirts of the city,—Britric felt as if the last and only ray of light in his life had gone from him.

So much and deeply had he suffered, so illusory had all happiness been to him, so false, so treacherously ensnaring every high hope he once had cherished, that by degrees he had acquired a conviction that all bright and beautiful things were doomed before birth. When Ione smiled good-by to him, and waved her hand, it seemed to him that she was going away for ever. He wondered if even beyond the stars there could be any meeting between such a soul as his, so scarred with frightful disillusion, and

a spirit like hers into which the consciousness of cruelty and evil had not entered.

The thought that if she reached womanhood she must see and know the world in all its naked brutality, turned him cold with apprehension; and he could almost have prayed to the Unknown God to take her away before the tempest of life could attack and break her.

Pleasures flit across the surface and pass like phantoms; but pain brands its mark upon the spirit; and in the infinite spirit there is room for infinite anguish. So mused Britric. And to his ceaseless anxiety and misery about Giséla, was added a new and strange anxiety about Ione. In no way had his admiration for the child lessened his love for the absent and ever unforgotten woman, to whom he had given the love of his impassioned manhood. For it is in the same moment the tragedy and glory of the love of such as Britric that in its very essence it is eternal. Being one with his consciousness of immortality, no mortal disaster could utterly extinguish it. Nay, disasters had but intensified its mysterious potency. No merciful oblivion was possible.

*"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it."*

That Britric still clung to his belief in the Unknown God, was less in hope than on principle, as a gallant soldier defending an outpost against repeated and ferocious onslaughts would stay fighting to the end, and perish rather than surrender. From inherent constancy he would not desert either his love or his God; the more especially as a God of Love needs must have few, pitifully few, votaries in a world of hatred!

But it was bitter to be always on the losing side. And Britric's face grew sterner and thinner, and his bearing unconsciously prouder and more aloof as the burden of inward misery became the heavier.

With it all,—even in the garb of a slave, powerless, obscure, and helpless,—he pitied the world far more than he abhorred it.

He almost could have pitied the Druids. Despite their claims to omnipotence, despite their victory over himself, he suspected them to be but the blind dupes of some ancient immeasurable evil, ferociously destructive, implacably hostile to men; an evil acting through their vanity and folly,—

subtly controlling them even while they believed themselves the masters. It was this consciousness of a deep-rooted, hideous evil, mysteriously operating through their words and actions, which had clinched Britric's determination to defy them. With such an adversary there should be, he thought, no compromise.

And yet of what avail his challenge? Had it not only fixed the yoke of tyranny more firmly on the necks of his people? Would not his fate now and henceforth be a perpetual deterrent to any King of Western Alba who might have spirit enough to chafe against a slavery which held in an iron grip the entire manhood of the country, from monarch down to swineherd?

The day Ione left Capernaum there had come upon Britric a sudden and violent longing to confide to the child his rank and history, and ask her prayers for his unhappy people, and for the rescue of Giséla from bondage to men who knew not even the meaning of the word compassion. Then close on the heels of this impulse came a burning shame. How low had he fallen, when he could crave the relief of uncovering his wounds to a child; and to

the very child he had prayed God to protect from knowledge of the universal tragedy called life!

The night after Ione left, Britric dreamt of Giséla. The dream was confused and left no very clear impression; but he slept again, and wakened, just before dawn, with an acute conviction that his wife was in some mortal danger and that her cry for help had gone forth to him from the depths of her despair. His wife! Thus he thought of her even now; for although the Druids had claimed to have broken every link between her soul and his, and had pronounced husband and wife eternally divided, Britric had never felt so deep an ardor of devotion to Giséla as at this moment, when it seemed as if her heart cried to him as to the only one who ever loved her truly.

Then there surged up in his own heart a determination that she should not cry to him in vain. But how could he help her? What could a slave in Syria do for a Queen in Western Alba?

Britric braced himself as for some supreme compelling effort.

Warrior to the very depths of his being, the seem-

ing hopelessness of his aim, the overwhelming nature of the obstacles, roused in him that fire of resolution by which men endowed with the utmost capacity for love achieve results that colder hearts and sluggish minds deem "impossible."

Giséla was in mortal danger; Giséla must be saved.

But how?

Britric strove to think, and was still struggling and groping when dawn glowed roseate and golden on the mountain heights, and crept slowly down into the valleys, and glittered sparkling and dancing on the waters.

To the Unknown God Britric prayed a prayer which came from heart, soul, mind, and spirit.

"God, I have striven to be faithful. Save my people; save my Belovèd One. Shall not love be victor over hatred? God of Love, I pray thee, fail me not!"

Then there came a hush in his heart. The other slaves, who slept around him, seemed very far away. For an instant it was as if he stood on the shores of Western Alba and looked out across the bay, at such a dazzling sunrise that he wondered if at last

his soul were set free from his body. He felt a power, an ecstasy of hope, a sense of victory and deliverance, which made him say in his heart "Can this be death?"

Was Giséla dead and free from every earthly danger? And was he too delivered? And at last would she look into his eyes again, and tell him she had loved him always, but that the Druids had enchanted her by evil spells. And now the spells were broken? . . .

At this moment the Ethiopian slave groaned in his sleep, and wakened; and Britric came down with a shock from dreams to realities.

The black giant looked at the fair barbarian intently.

"Thou art sad," he said in his hesitating, stumbling voice; "servitude is worse to thee than death."

Even taller and stronger than Britric, the slave gazed at him with curious deference and humility.

"Wilt thou come?" he said, almost timidly.

"Whither?" asked Britric.

The Ethiopian's eyes lighted up with an expression Britric had never seen in them before.

"To hear him of Nazareth," he said, "he who should be King of the Jews."

Britric hesitated. "What is he to do with me? Am I a Jew?" was the thought in his mind, but he refrained from giving it voice.

"This Nazarene heals the body," he said. "But what needest thou of healing? Verily *I* am no weakling, but if thou and I encountered in a wrestling match, I dare not promise *I* would be the victor!"

The Ethiopian grinned appreciatively. Then his face grew solemn. Words would not come to him for what he wished to say. He only very dimly comprehended the change in his own soul since Jesus, as if by some amazing magic, had put patience in his heart in place of the tormenting sullen wrath which had consumed him.

Britric's swift power of sympathy enabled him to divine something (though not all) of what was happening in the Ethiopian's mind. And, pitying the humiliation of this fighting man reduced to be a most unwilling hewer of wood and drawer of water, he would not condemn any doctrine or idea that gave the slave even a shred of consolation.

"As thou wilt," he said. "I shall go forth this day and look upon Jesus, and proffer him thanks in that he healed me of my sickness."

This was what the Ethiopian expected. But inwardly Britric was saying to himself, "Could Jesus but heal the wounds of the immortal spirit, could he send release and comfort to Giséla, then would I believe him Heaven-Born!"

As this thought flashed suddenly upon him, it seemed as if a voice in his heart, a voice silent but all-compelling, whispered, "Seek, and thou shalt find."

Then he said to the Ethiopian,

"The master has need of me when he awakens. Not yet can I go with thee; but I will ask leave of Claudius afterwards. Very courteous this noble Roman. If thou and I needs must be slaves, verily I thank the Gods we toil in the service of a warrior, and not as chattels of some purse-proud merchant."

Again the Ethiopian showed his teeth in an admiring grin.

He tolerated Claudius; but he worshiped Britric.

Britric felt the man's affection, and wondered at it, so little had he been used to gratitude.

Ah, but there was no Arch-Druid here to frighten the Ethiopian into abject terror, and set him whimpering and trembling like a beaten hound!

Britric smiled bitterly; had not the men of the King's Guard in Western Alba been strong and stalwart as the Ethiopian; and had they not one and all deserted him in his hour of need, when, had they stood firm, and trusted and obeyed him, the evil power of the Druids might have been for ever broken?

What was man's courage, Britric wondered, if a Druid's wand could shatter it?

"If thou and I were together in the desert," he said to the Ethiopian, "and a body of priests came out to seize me and to slay me as a sacrifice,—what wouldst thou do?"

The Ethiopian made an expressive gesture, as if gripping a man's throat and strangling him. This he repeated many times.

"All dead now," he said; "much sacrifice for Gods. Long-robed ones all killed. *You* safe! Me safe!"

Whereupon, at this unexpected answer, Britric broke into laughter that astonished himself.

And again the Ethiopian grinned. "Forgive enemies, Jesus say," he articulated somewhat more clearly than usual; "yes, forgive. But I say *kill first!* Then forgive easy."

Britric smiled anew; the Ethiopian was a strange but by no means unpleasant blend of child and tiger.

"Why dost thou so revere Jesus the Nazarene?" asked Britric.

"Why?" The Ethiopian echoed the question as if surprised. And then he answered, "Because you die,—he make you live."

To Britric it seemed ironical that his recovery of health had won for the healer Jesus the homage of all in the Centurion's house, excepting only himself. And now more than ever he felt isolated in a prison of dreary solitude, so stricken at heart that it must transcend mortal power ever to give him lasting consolation.

Without hope and without fear he lived, and so must go on living until death released him.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### A VOICE FROM AFAR

IT was night in Western Alba; a night of stars and silence. The wind had sobbed itself to sleep; the spirits of the waves and waters brooded and dreamed in tranquil stillness.

On such a night Giséla had murmured tenderly, adoringly, to Britric that he was as a shining star, she as a flickering glow-worm which by the miracle of love should rise up to the star. She had likened her being to a mirror of steel, beautiful only when *his* image was reflected in its gray depths. And he had striven to share with her his hope and expectation of the coming of an Unknown God who should dethrone the cruel Gods and reign in love and mercy. Even as he spoke of mercy, Giséla had shivered with a chill premonition that his trusting ardor and devotion would but lure him to destruction, and engulf her in disaster.

And now she was alone; and the stillness of the night brought her no balm of comfort.

She lay awake and waited for the dawn,—yet dreaded even while she waited.

The silence frightened her; and though she had trembled at the ferocious voices of the winter storm-winds, and had craved quietness and peace, yet there was no rest for her in this silence, no peace in this hush,—only immeasurable weariness. She sighed and closed her eyes; but sleep would not come at her call.

The night wore on; the breathless hush was deepening, as the sky changed from sapphire blue to an enshrouding blackness, without one glimmer of light to herald the coming dawn. Waves and waters, rocky shores and undulating moorlands, all were hidden. And blacker than the night was the darkness in the heart of Giséla, a darkness of despair so crushing that it almost blotted out even the names of Love and Gladness.

Around her, as she lay in her bed, burned nine tall torches set in stands of iron. She feared the dark; and her loneliness so bitterly oppressed her

that she craved these lights as mute companions.

Gone all traces of her beauty. Her eyes were dull and clouded, as if the soul behind them had been cast into a sleep so heavy that it held the heart and brain relentlessly imprisoned.

Gone all the rounded softness of her face and form; gone the color from her lips; and vanished the grace and flower-like sweetness which long ago had drawn the eyes of the Chief Captain to covet her for his own, and not to hesitate at treason, cruelty and base betrayal as the price of her. Very long it seemed since she first had trembled beneath his burning gaze the day she was brought bound and captive into Western Alba,—the day Britric had taken pity on her and had cut her bonds and set her free.

Suddenly, as if a veil were drawn aside, this day came back to her.

When the Chief Captain took her to wife, the black-bearded Arch-Druid had laid his hand on her brow, and in the name of the Most High Gods had bidden her forget the outlaw Britric:

"Perished is Britric; vanished his glory for evermore; wiped out his name from man's remem-

brance. Nor even in the underworld of death and darkness shall he find his erstwhile bride or any friend to greet him. Alone is he among the demons! And, in the name of the Eternal Gods, I do command thee, Queen Giséla, to forget him. By the power of my wand I wipe his image from thy heart, his words from thy brain, and his face from the memory of thine eyes."

So had the Arch Priest spoken; and though the touch of his hand was neither rough nor heavy, yet by the power of his wand he took away from her all recollection of the past, leaving her only darkness and blank listless weariness.

As in a nightmare, she had submitted blindly when the grim Arch-Druid laid her hands within the hands of the Chief Captain and pronounced her wedded to the man she utterly abhorred.

The Chief Captain that day had been clad in a mantle of Phœnician purple. The crown of Britric was set on his brow; and the sword of Britric—the sword of the King—was girt to his side with sacred rites and ceremonies.

And the multitude acclaimed him though they did not love him.

Since that morning, Giséla lived but as a slave to her harsh master. And though she was dressed in the robes of a Queen, and wore a circlet of gems on her dark hair, never was she permitted to forget that her mother had been but a slave, and that in the eyes of the new ruler she was contemptible and base.

Sullenly she had obeyed him in his every word and fancy; helplessly she submitted alike to his caresses and his cruelty. And there were many nights when he drank deeply of metheglin and mead, and came staggering into her presence, his eyes smoldering with a reddish light which boded ill for the shrinking, quivering woman whose fate was in his hands.

"Coward," he said to her one night after his tongue was loosened by his gloomy revels in the banquet hall. "Thrice-cursèd fool and coward; frightened at a breath of wind, shuddering at a word, a look! Slave and earth-worm, verily, I loathe thee! And 'twas for thee, for a slave's daughter, I betrayed my King."

His voice rose to a roar; then sank to a hoarse whisper.

"Hast thou no comfort for me, Woman? Heavy the price I paid for thee! Yet even in my arms thou still eludest me, and dreamest of the vanished Britric. The Gods shall curse thee for a wanton, who beguilest and entanglest the souls of men, so that thy mute lips madden them to frenzy."

Giséla answered never a word. His fury was as a lashing storm, and she bent and swayed in it, and then fell at his feet in abject terror.

With his foot he spurned her, as a huntsman might spurn a hound which had been disobedient.

Then, when she neither stirred nor spoke, he scorned her the more. And lifting her up in his mighty arms he carried her into an ill-garnished room with one small window looking out across the waters.

There he left her prisoned.

No women came to wait on her. Nor could she gain tidings of what passed in the outer world; for though a serf was sent, each noon and sunset, to bring her a horn cup of water and a lump of bread, he was one of the hapless wretches whose tongues had been cut out. In his own misery it gave him a sullen satisfaction to see the upstart Queen

brought low; and the malevolent looks he cast on her were such that she dreaded his coming, and shrank back and shivered when she heard him drawing the bolts to enter.

The days crept by with leaden footsteps, and Giséla had but one solace. From the window she could look out towards the waves, as they came moaning, tossing, heaving, tumbling on the shore. And though she knew the spirits of the sea to be most treacherous and cruel, yet she hardly thought they could be terrible as men.

When the fog swirled up and hid the waters, she would fling herself on the couch of wolfskins, and lie there in a stupor, scarcely stirring or even thinking.

Her mind grew blank, her body inert, and her soul seemed sinking into a heavier and more dreamless slumber.

But after a while the Chief Captain, the Usurper-King, had bidden his other women go to the Queen and bathe her in sweet essences, clothe her in silk, and braid her tangled tresses; and then bring her back into his presence. For though he

was never happy or contented with her, he was no happier without her. Other faces pleased him for a passing hour; but from each of his women he turned after a while in scorn. Each and all disgusted him by servile fawnings.

For love and joy he hungered. Yet he knew not love; and sought it by ways which led ever further and further away from it.

Time and again he returned to Giséla; and again forsook her. And though she never crossed his will or raised her voice in anger or complaining, yet her horror of him smoldered, and he felt it.

It seemed that love was not for him. So he was fain to divert himself by lashing up Giséla's hatred, till it might break forth in word or action. Then, he thought, he would torment and punish her till she should implore his mercy. And he would give her brief mercy only to torture her again.

Furiously he loathed her, in that she seemed to hold him by a spell even after he long had wearied of her.

But she did not strive to hold him; rather she craved that he would leave her unmolested.

So fared these two, whom the Arch-Druid had pronounced immutably united.

. . . . . .

As May Day was dawning, Giséla the Queen wakened from sleep just as a pale shaft of light came through the iron-barred east window.

She put her hand to her brow, and tried to recall what she had dreamt. The last few nights her dreams had brought faint memories of King Britric whom the Druid's arts had wiped out from her waking mind. Now, as she struggled to recapture the lost dream, her head ached with the effort. Dully she hated the Arch-Druid for having taken Britric from her; nor had she any recollection of the hour in which she herself, in fear for her soul's safety, prayed the Gods to wipe out love and give her peace.

But never a day had passed since then that her heart had not weighed leaden in her breast,—though why it ached she understood not.

With the quenching of her love for Britric had come the crushing of her spirit, the clouding of her brain, the fading of her beauty.

The Chief Captain had won for himself only her

trembling body. Her soul was dumb, and had been sleeping ever since the moment when she turned away from Britric.

Yet the soul was not extinguished. In her dreams she gazed on Britric's face. But when she wakened the dream had gone. Nor could she recall Britric's words, nor the tones of his voice, although she knew that she had heard him speaking.

Very miserable and lonely the awakening; for save in sleep and dreams there was no comfort for Giséla.

On the dark horizon, where sea and sky seemed one, a silvery light flashed into gold; and the streak of gold widened and shot out sword-like shafts of radiance. The sky glowed rose-color. May Day had come, rejoicing.

But for Giséla times and seasons long since had lost their meaning. She closed her eyes again and wished it were night, even as at night she had wished for morning.

Then sleep had mercy on her. And when she wakened she felt so strangely tranquil that she wondered whence came this peace, such peace as

she had felt only in the protecting arms of Britric, Britric from whom she was for ever separated, Britric whom for her soul's sake the Druids had commanded her never to name again or even to remember.

Giséla wondered what was her soul, that in order to preserve it she must forfeit every joy that had made sunlight in her gray existence?

The rosy glow of the sky paled into mauve, and deepened to blue; and a breeze came up from the sea, not boisterous, but gentle and refreshing.

Giséla stirred on her couch. She seemed to hear sweet echoes out of the past.

Dim and far away the melody, but potent even in its faintness.

She smiled; but in less than a moment the smile was frozen on her lips. Outside her door came the clanking footsteps of the Captain-in-Chief. (In her mind she called him "the Chief Captain" always; never "the King.")

He flung the door open; bowed his head and shoulders to pass in; then shut the door and drew the bolts.

He was dressed for the chase; below the window

there rose a baying of hounds; and Giséla could hear the rhythmic tramping of the spearmen changing guard. But the sounds reached her as if from far away; for the glow of her dream had not yet wholly gone from her.

The Chief Captain stared and scowled.

"Thou lovest Britric still," he said accusingly. "Wanton, and daughter of a wanton, wouldst thou have two husbands? One in the flesh; another in thy dreams?"

He strode across the room, and jerked her roughly up in bed.

"Arise, and wait on thy lord and master," he said. "Have I not bought thee at a price; even the forfeiting of loyalty and honor? And darest thou lie abed and dream of him from whom I took thee?"

Giséla rose obediently; and she drew a long furred robe around her. But though her fingers trembled, the taunt had roused in her a new emotion, something which was not entirely fear. Like a hand groping in the dark, and touching a hidden jewel which the light will presently reveal, she searched for the lost dream. And the dream glim-

mered to her inner vision, so that in seeking it she lost her terror of the tyrant.

Her drooping eyelids were raised; in her languorous dark eyes a brightness was dawning. Her lips were parted in wonder; for the Chief Captain's angry interrogating frown no longer had the power to shatter her.

He spoke again, louder and more scornfully. But his words did not reach her. She seemed to herself to be standing at the entrance to a cavernous tunnel under the earth; and her fears were gone, for at the end of the tunnel she felt there would be freedom.

She doubted not, nor questioned. As in a dream she went forward, stretching out her hands blindly but trustingly.

The Chief Captain stood gazing silently upon her. Ever she had eluded him; and now he felt her still farther away. Although he stood beside her, their souls were worlds apart.

Roughly he gripped her hands in one of his iron hands, and with the other grasped her by the shoulder and violently shook her.

She neither cried nor swooned.

Hitherto he had despised her for her slavishness. Now he hated her because she did not fall down at his feet and beg for mercy.

"Giséla," he said; "I weary of thy wiles. Without beauty or wit thou chainest me; and 'tis enchantment, vile enchantment."

She seemed not to hear him. Long and often had he tormented her, but to-day her ear was dulled to his voice, her eyes blinded to his scowl.

"What, in the name of all the Gods and demons, had befallen her?" he asked himself.

To her it seemed the tunnel now grew wider; and she felt she soon would come out into light and freedom. It was as if a silver thread were drawing her towards the light; a thread fine as a cobweb, yet strong so that not even the Chief Captain's hand could break it.

Giséla's lips parted in a sigh of thankfulness; for within her heart a sleeping voice wakened to tell her that Britric held the far end of the thread. And suddenly she knew the Druids had deceived her, and that her sin had not been in her love but in her terrified denial of true love. From the depths of her soul the past came to life; and she

saw herself as a straw blown in the tempest,—a tempest lashed up by those tyrants who ruled through fear and hatred.

She saw her King and husband branded with marks of torture, yet unbreakably courageous; and herself, alas, so blinded in her miserable confusion and sick horror that she had failed him utterly. Yet even as she had turned her face away, she had seen his sad eyes shining with unquenchable love and pitying forgiveness. And this had frightened her the more, for it made him seem to her as a being of another race, and she had felt in the same moment awestruck and despairing.

But now at last, born of exceeding grief, there surged up in her heart such poignant remorse that it lighted in her spirit a gleam of the loving courage for which Britric the King had looked in vain that frightful day of anguish in the dungeon.

Giséla clasped her hands in ecstatic resolution. Even as the dawn comes first as a gleam of pallid light on the horizon, and then illumines all the sky, so should the dawn of courage in her spirit glow and spread until fear be cast out and the darkness of confusion conquered! For a voice in her heart

told her that Britric lived; and Britric loved her. And now she must be worthy of his unchanging love.

She would proclaim the truth at last! She would be his own brave Queen!

As she gazed into a visionary distance the Chief Captain, enthralled and furious, glared at her, his dark brows frowning. A tortured rage rose up from the abysses of his storm-tossed spirit, for he knew that not for *him* were her eyes shining, not for him her pale face glowing with an exquisite new loveliness that smote his heart with arrows of jealousy more bitter than death.

"Thou art mine," he said; "mine only. For ever curst and blasted is the soul of Britric. Thy love for him and his for thee is burnt to ashes, crushed beneath my heel, and trodden into the mire, even as thou shalt be,—yea, thy white tender body,—if thou seekest to escape me."

Then the new-born courage in the soul of Giséla shone forth visibly. Her voice was clear and steady, as she answered,

"Nay, thy power over me is ended. Very long have I been deceived and enchained. But as

though a hideous black hand that blinded my eyes has at last been lifted away, so that I see and know the truth, even thus the fetters of my soul are broken! I shall be thy slave no more."

In a frenzy of amazement the Chief Captain gripped her by the shoulders and hurled her against the wall.

Vividly flashed back upon him that spring day, very long distant, in the forest, when Britric had come upon him and had bidden him unhand Giséla.

And the memory tore him with conflicting tempests of remorse and fury, shame and jealousy; black hate and angry admiration for the King he had betrayed and yet could never blot out from his memory.

His mighty frame shook with contending passions.

But Giséla neither quailed nor trembled.

Silent and still she stood; and instead of lowering her eyelids, instead of turning her face away, she bravely met his eyes.

And his heart sickened within him, for he saw the new soul in her eyes,—and he felt that soul was not for him.

Then Giséla spoke. "Very poor and weak am I. Little did I merit Britric's love. And very long and bitterly have I suffered for forsaking him, —punished even by those tyrants who branded my King's flesh with red hot irons and drove him out into the desert. Verily I was bewitched when the black demons and the Druids made me say I utterly renounced him. False was this. And now, even as golden sunlight flashing into a deep cavern, so is the love of Britric illumining my spirit."

The Chief Captain stared at her, and put his hand up to his brow. Was this Giséla? Or was his own brain reeling into madness? Never had the slave-woman's daughter spoken in such accents. Never before had he respected her.

"The bones of Britric," he said, "are whitening in the desert. His soul is chained in darkness. Let us remember him no more, for thou art mine! Mine, soul and body!"

Giséla heeded him not. It seemed to her the invisible thread was drawing her more swiftly up through the steep tunnel. And she knew that a wide plain of sunlight waited her beyond.

As in a vision,—veiled from her mortal eyes, yet clear to her soul, and giving her increasing courage, —she felt the love of Britric penetrating from afar. It seemed as if his voice were saying "Fear not, for the God of Love and Mercy shall deliver thee." So had he spoken in the dungeon long ago, when terror had dulled Giséla's ears and closed her heart against him. But now the time approached for the fulfillment of his words.

The Chief Captain watched her in silent fury and amazement. Deaf to the baying of his hounds, forgetful of his huntsmen waiting below, he gazed at her with passionate, devouring eyes. In all his mighty strength of thew and sinew, all his bulk and force and vehement energy, he felt himself dethroned, powerless, helpless.

Must Britric even from the grave be still the King? Was the magic of the Druid's wand a mocking lie and a delusion? Was all the seeming victory barren? Were the High Gods tottering on their thrones? Was Britric's God, the Unknown God, no dream, but a reality so potent that every adversary must go down before Him? Was this Unknown God a great predestined conqueror?

And were the torturers of Britric caught in the net they themselves had woven; caught and cursed and doomed?

As he asked himself these questions, the Chief Captain's face grew livid. His soul seemed to be sinking in a quicksand; and then, for the first time in his haughty and defiant life, sheer terror came upon him. With terror came its attendant demon, coward-cruelty.

Blindly, madly, the Chief Captain unsheathed his dagger; and furiously he struck out at Giséla.

A swirling as of angry waves and waters, a rushing as of a mighty storm-wind swept over him; then vanished swiftly. And he stood amidst a hush so terrible, so deep, that it was as if the silence of death had closed around him.

At his feet lay Giséla, his dagger sheathed in her breast.

And she, whose cowardice he had mocked, she whom he had despised and scorned, she whom he had spurned as a hound, and taunted as a slave, a fool, a wanton, now appeared to him immeasurably precious.

He would have given his life, his eyes, his soul,

to bring her back, and make amends for all his cruelties, and win her as a woman and a Queen should be won, by gentleness and courtesy and true affection.

But it was too late.

The cage was opened, the bird would soon be free. And his own hand had unlatched the door, —mad that he was, thrice mad with jealousy of Britric!

But now even his jealousy was burnt to ashes; and he felt the bitter loneliness of desolate old age come upon him swiftly and irrevocably in a single moment.

Love, hate, glory, triumph, vengeance, where were they now?

He bowed his head, and from the depths of his heart came the cry, "Britric, forgive!"

At the sound of Britric's name, Giséla opened her eyes and strove to speak.

The Chief Captain fell on his knees beside her. Tears scorching like liquid fire rolled down his face, and his hands trembled and turned icy cold. He did not raise Giséla, or draw the dagger from her breast; for when he drew it out her life-blood

must gush forth. He craved first to hear her speak; though in the same moment as he yearned for the sound of her voice he dreaded lest she curse him with her last breath,—a curse which would haunt him for ever.

But when she spoke, faintly, feebly, her words were far other than he had thought to hear.

"Britric lives," she murmured. "I see him!"

Then her eyes closed again, but after a moment opened.

"Long ago he—has—*forgiven*—" she whispered. Then came a deep hush.

Giséla struggled to speak. In the great hour of life that we call "death" she was making her supremest effort.

The Chief Captain bent lower over her, lower still.

"Britric forgives," she murmured again, so faintly that it was less through his mortal hearing than in his anguished spirit her erstwhile tormentor felt the words which pierced his heart as with a sword of fire:

"Britric forgives. . . . I too—"

The rest was silence.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### LOVE TRIUMPHANT

MANY a time Britric had wearied of the splendor of Capernaum, and, as the days dragged by, he had yearned more and more acutely for the heather-clad moors of his own kingdom, which he could not hope to see again with waking eyes.

The day he went out to seek Jesus of Nazareth, he was more than ordinarily repelled by the atmosphere of the prosperous and densely populated city. Though it was early morning the streets were already thronged, with merchants from Antioch, Damascus, and Palmyra; traders from the towns of the Decapolis, caravans from Istakhar and Alexandria; and, trudging afoot, sturdy Syrian peasants bringing the produce of their fields to sell in the marketplace; fishermen from the Sea of Galilee; and Roman soldiers marching past with swift and rhythmic step. All these, of many different nations, jostled each other in their scramble for wealth,

power, or pleasure; making Britric feel only the more solitary.

He turned out of the Damascus road, wandered down a byway to the shores of the Lake, and walked past a Roman temple, glancing wearily at the colonnades of colored marble and the array of stately statues, Mars, Venus, Diana, Jupiter, Vulcan and the rest. He had often gazed on them before, and had sometimes mingled with the throng of votaries, in an attempt to understand the State religion of Imperial Rome.

The previous night he had taken a letter from Claudius to one of the official dignitaries whose palace overlooked the shining waters. And as he stood watching the innumerable gaily-lighted boats gliding over the inland sea, his own depression had been enhanced by the sight of these many pleasure parties of Roman gallants with their ladies. Some of them he knew by sight, for they visited his master Claudius; stalwart young men; dissipated may be, but not yet so degenerate as to be incapable of taking action when the need should arise to turn from idle dalliance to the real work of the world.

Standing there alone, while the light of the lamps

and the light of the stars made the scene as clear as day, Britric had envied the revellers.

Then he had felt ashamed, for he knew envy to be an ignoble quality, not worthy of a worshiper of the Unknown God.

But on seeing these young men, in their purple and fine linen, diverting themselves with women who appeared to be rejoicing in their presence, Britric's thoughts were drawn back to the night he first had taken Giséla out in a coracle on the waters of Western Alba. How adoringly she had looked at him, how exquisitely sweet her voice; but how pathetic her eyes, as if even in her happiness her soul foresaw disaster!

Perhaps these thoughts caused his dream that he had returned to Alba and stood looking out across the sea and welcoming the sunrise. But the joyousness of the dream had given way to an acute depression, not negative and inert, but fiery and violent. And though Britric kept his emotions always controlled and hidden, they burned the more intensely the more resolutely he concealed them.

On this especial morning, Capernaum was utterly

repellent to him. Even by starlight its beauty had no glamour for his senses. By day its flaunting material prosperity and insistent gayety seemed the more mocking. With its medley of East and West, and its blend of barbarity and culture it was the most vicious of all the cities Britric had known since he had been carried away into slavery.

Though warriors of many nations passed through the Damascus gate, and though the Roman garrison was in full strength, and the presence of Roman soldiers on the Quays and in the streets was a perpetual reminder of the omnipotence of Cæsar, yet beneath all the pomp and pride and opulence of the dominant race, Britric thought he could discern, or rather feel, a poisonous corruption.

As he stood on the shores of the Lake, close by the Temple of Diana, it seemed to him as if all this magnificence was doomed, and as in a mirror he saw the noisy city changed to a heap of silent ruins.

He wondered whether Jesus of Nazareth would be whelmed in the impending cataclysm, or whether His teaching possibly might build foundations of a new and powerful religion which should outlast the cult of Jupiter and Venus and Diana, and live after

their temples were abandoned and forsaken? But even while he looked impersonally into the future, his personal sorrow racked him, and never for a moment did his heart cease from its ache of pity for Giséla. Her cry of distress reached him amidst the multitudinous life of restless Capernaum. Her voice seemed the symbol of the voices of his people, helpless, confused, and weakly submissive to a tyranny which worked subtly on their fears and superstitions, and starved their nobler aspirations.

Weary as Britric was in spirit, and little as he could see the reason why he had been dragged back from merciful death to the daily death-in-life of exile and servitude, yet an inward conviction gripped him that it was destiny and not blind chance which had been at work in this. If he could endure to the end, if his spirit could rise above his griefs, and faithfully trust the Unknown God, might not the way to victory yet be disclosed?

Britric, despite all his sufferings, despite even his seeming hopelessness, was not of those who surrender or accept defeat. Exiled, dethroned, he felt himself still King of Western Alba, responsible to the God of Gods for the salvation of his people.

If he, their King, wavered in faith and resolution, how might the people be released from bondage?

As he asked himself this question, he felt a current of new life surge up in his breast; and he turned and walked swiftly through the crowded streets, making his way in the direction of the Jewish synagogue where the Ethiopian had told him Jesus might oftentimes be heard declaring His strange doctrine.

The possibility entered Britric's mind that Jesus —so utterly unlike any among the priests and scribes and doctors—might have learned the secret of the Unknown God. And he marvelled at his own previous dullness of mind. Only now the full significance of the words of Claudius reached his intellect; only now did he begin to realize that to have so impressed the keen-eyed and astute Centurion, this Jesus must be more than a mere preacher and a healer of diseases. Did not Claudius imply that Jesus probed the age-long maladies of soul and spirit, and had come to conquer evils which were at the root of the world-miseries? Had not Jesus said of Claudius, "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel"; thereby showing Him-

self exempt from such harsh narrow jealousy as would have characterized a Jew priest or a Druid?

Britric's thoughts flowed more freely as he walked the faster. If Jesus had been sent and chosen by the God of Mercy, the God of Everlasting Love and Justice, then surely if Britric spoke with Him face to face, he would see in a flash whether here was one whom he could trust, one to whose wisdom he might turn for guidance?

Yet even as these hopes shone out like sunlight after storm, Britric's heart sank. All his worst reverses had stricken him just as he had been most confident and trusting. Should he again permit Hope the syren to lure him into ambush? Exaltation of soul had with him been always the prelude to disaster. Yes; but was he not a warrior? And may a warrior flinch under ten defeats, or twenty, or a hundred? Must he not endure to the end, believe to the end? For mayhap before the Unknown God can unveil His secrets, He must test the aspirant. And the more prolonged the test, the more soul-penetrating the ordeals, the greater the revelation when at last it has been earned by loyalty and valor.

The sun glittered on the white Parian marble of the synagogue, and this whiteness gleamed the brighter against a frowning background of rocks of black basalt.

Without molestation Britric was allowed to pass in through the main door of the synagogue; and though he felt the presence of many groups of people, he did not look at them. His eyes were drawn at once to the face of Jesus of Nazareth, who was speaking in a voice which reached Britric's innermost spirit.

It was even as the Roman officer had said; though Jesus was a Jew,—a Jew of the line of the long-dispossessed royal house of David, there was that in His eyes which seemed to look through and beyond all barriers of race and earthly heritage. A King was He, not visibly reigning in pomp and earthly magnificence; but a King in exile, a King whose royalty had come out of eternity and must last into eternity.

The voice of Jesus was clear and very melodious. Courtesy and accents of command, gentleness and a strength drawn from the highest Heavens, met in His tones; and even before Britric understood what

He was saying, the voice and face completely won his homage.

His heart leapt and throbbed, and then grew tranquil as with a reflection of supreme calm from regions beyond death or time or mortal anguish. For the penetrating eyes of Jesus had seen him and were looking on him; and the words which rang out were as a message of encouragement, a strong assurance that victory, though very long delayed, was certain in the end:

"Do good to them that hate you; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you. Do good, never despairing."

Britric started, but quickly regained his outward composure. Never had he known such rules proclaimed for the guidance of man in dealing with men! But had *he* not followed these rules even before he heard them voiced?

Again Jesus spoke:

"Be ye merciful as your Father in Heaven is merciful."

And again Britric's heart throbbed with passionate intensity of aspiration, even as a caged eagle

might beat its wings against prison bars and strive to fly out and upwards to the sun.

Here at last was an envoy of the God of Mercy, one who dared to voice the true religion; and to voice it in this crowd of Jews, to whom such compassionate commands must have seemed scarcely less strange than Britric's invocation to the Unknown God had sounded to the men of Western Alba.

The cruelty of the Druids rankled less in Britric's mind than the shame of knowing his warriors so chained in bondage to a coward-superstition that they dared not follow him when he strove to save the seven helpless maidens.

But here at last was a leader who counselled mercy and not sacrifice.

Britric looked around to see in the faces of the Jews if they accepted this new teaching. In some he saw wonder, in others doubt, in others a sullen resentment. In a few a welcoming joy; but, alas, in very few!

Even amidst his own ecstatic delight in hearing divine mercy voiced in a world of cruelty, Britric

felt a pang of sorrow when he gazed on the heavy, unresponsive faces of those in whom such words wakened no answering sympathy.

Then, though Jesus was still speaking, Britric no longer distinguished the words. His spirit seemed to rise beyond need of words into a region where truth was silent but all-conquering. Though Jesus had looked at him but for one moment, he was aware that in this moment his soul had been read as never any other in mortal form had read it. And Britric who had refrained from revealing his secret wounds to any man or woman, was glad this awe-inspiring Jesus had eyes from which nothing could be hidden.

The suffering and need of every human creature was to Jesus even as if He bore it Himself, so tender His heart, so all-embracing His compassion. The sorrows of the universe were His, and His the love which toiled to bring salvation. Britric who had carried the burden of an earthly crown, who had loved and would for ever love his erring people and never cease to pray for their redemption, Britric could comprehend, more readily than the priests and scribes and merchants, how vast a load of sad-

ness weighed on the immortal spirit of Him whose immortality was veiled in mortal form.

In an instant Britric's own sufferings seemed blessèd, not accursèd. He understood now that the more aspiring the soul the more deep must be the anguish of contact with cruelty and prejudice and blindness. Everything he himself had suffered, he felt Jesus was suffering daily, hourly, in secret, even though His brow was calm and His words tranquil.

Then Britric's emotion of love and grief for the Divine One so overcame him that his strong frame trembled, and his eyes grew dim with tears, for it was as if he was back again at the Stones of Sacrifice, cursed, branded, outlawed, mocked, and bitterly derided. But he was not alone! Beside him, tortured with him, hoping with him, forgiving with him, stood Jesus! And it seemed to him that from Jesus, from divine transcendent Love and Mercy, had come that inner voice which had enabled him to pardon his tormentors, and to trust in God even while God appeared to have abandoned him.

Britric put his hand up to his eyes, as if to clear

his bodily sight. Never had Jesus set foot in Western Alba. No man that terrible day had stood beside the outlawed King and shared his anguish.

Then whence came this vision of Jesus at the Stones of Sacrifice?

Britric's brain reeled. Jesus was born of woman, Jesus was man, and yet—and yet—how may a man dwelling in Galilee stand on the moors of Western Alba, sharing the pangs of torture, sharing the soul-agony, of one whom in earthly life he then had never beheld or known?

And as if in answer to this questioning, the voice rang out, "That which is impossible with man is possible to God."

Then came silence.

Then the shuffling of many feet, as the crowd passed out. But Jesus waited; and after a while went out alone.

None of the people spoke to Him, though some looked at Him doubtfully, wonderingly.

As He stood in the open space in front of the synagogue, Britric followed; and, forgetful or regardless of the onlookers, flung himself on his knees before the Nazarene. In a voice broken with

awe and gladness and immeasurably deep emotion, he murmured, "What may I do to serve thee, Spirit of Love and Mercy?"

Then Britric felt the hand of Jesus rest on his bowed head in benediction; and again he heard the wonderful voice in which majesty and tenderness blended as never in any other voice:

"Well hast thou served Our Father, God the giver of all goodness. So I say unto thee arise, and proffer thy petition."

Britric staggered to his feet. Although he was a taller man than Jesus, and thus must needs look down upon Him as they stood face to face, he felt his soul was looking upward.

The eyes of Jesus shone with a light which pierced down into the deeps of his affliction; and as the light shone forth, the darkness vanished.

"In my own country, far away," said Britric, "dwells my wife, from whom the blinded worshipers of demons separated me. As a trembling dove she must be, amidst these pitiless hawks. Very weak and fragile is Giséla, and my heart misgives me for her fate. Save only mine own self, there has been none to protect and cherish her."

His voice trembled. Then he said, "In my dreams her cry of anguish comes to me. Thrall is she to a man who knows not mercy, nor comprehends true love. Send her deliverance, Lord, even from earth into the blessed peace of Heaven. And to him who wrongs her, send repentance, and God's pardon."

Even as Britric spoke, it was if a leaden weight were lifted off his spirit.

"Well hast thou loved," said Jesus, "very faithfully hast thou served; and God thy Father heareth the cry of thy soul."

Britric drew a deep breath, as one who from captivity comes out into the freedom he so long has pined for.

"With all my heart I give thanks and praise unto God," he said. "But yet another boon would I implore of the Eternal Ruler of the Heavens. May He grant His mercy to each and all of my own people, so that not one, not even only one, shall still be left in bondage to the demons and false prophets. And to the priests of the false gods, may God send His eternal light to conquer darkness."

As Britric spoke, his eyes were dazzled; for he beheld a shaft of pure white radiance shine from the skies as Jesus looked up and prayed.

In a pillar of light stood the Nazarene, mortal in form but transfigured and illumined.

And Britric bowed his head, but spoke again, eagerly, fearlessly: "Lord, art Thou the one it was foretold I should meet face to face ere death o'ertake me?"

And the voice answered, "I am He."

From out the light Jesus spoke; His voice so gentle the passers-by did not stop to heed it, nor did they see the radiance that surrounded Him. But for Britric the words rang out as a clarion, summoning from realms beyond the stars those warrior angels he had striven in vain to call down, on that frightful morning at the Stones of Sacrifice.

"Thou desirest the redemption of thy people," said Jesus; "this also shall be granted thee. The Lord thy God is with thee; yea, and He will be for ever with thee. Called and chosen art thou, O Britric, son of Britric. And many blessings shall flow out to all thy foes that thou forgivest and for

whom thou intercedest. Great thy love, and shall prevail, even by the grace of God the Father Almighty, thy King and thy Creator, to Whom all praise and glory now and for evermore."

As Jesus spoke the name of Britric,—the name Britric himself had not once heard since the Arch-Druid had pronounced it everlastingly accursèd and wiped out from men's remembrance,—there came a great peace to his exiled spirit.

No matter what grief or torment might afflict him henceforth, he would never again shudder in fear lest the Unknown God be but a dream. The dream was true; and with truth to guide him, no darkness would appal.

It was in this moment that the delivered soul of Giséla passed from her stricken body. And though Britric saw her not, he knew in his heart that she was free and he need grieve for her no more. He knew, too, that her spirit loved him. No longer did she turn her face away.

Then all his bygone anguish bore fruit in a new strength. And as he looked into the eyes of Jesus,

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he felt a forecast of the glorious future, far away but certain and predestined, when God Himself shall dry every tear, and sin shall be for ever conquered.

Then hate and jealousy will have been vanquished utterly, and death shall be no more; for Love will reign supreme and radiantly triumphant, —even that Perfect Love which casts out fear, renews the soul, and shall bring wandering man at last into the joyous heritage of the eternal Sons of God.

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